

Sort Things Out

July 3, 2015

We're trying to get our minds quiet so that we can sort through what's going on inside. If there's a lot of noise, a lot of commotion running around, you can't see things clearly. And there's a lot to sort out. If we could just trust that our minds were basically good, basically pure, it'd be easy: Just go by our nature and everything would be okay. But our minds have lots of different things going in them inside, skillful and unskillful. So we need some way of sorting them out.

First to see what's the big issue: How do we decide what's skillful and not? We can be skillful at robbing banks or we can skillful at cheating people, but that's not the skillfulness we want. We want a happiness that lasts, and that doesn't come from robbing banks or cheating people. It comes from getting more sensitive inside to what real happiness is and how it can be found.

That's what the Buddha's teachings are all about: finding a happiness that's pure and blameless, true and blameless. In other words, it lasts. It's not going to change into anything else and it doesn't cause any suffering to anyone else. Finding that kind of happiness is a rare thing. But it is possible. Human beings can do it. The Buddha could do it; he taught other people how to do it. It's something we can do for ourselves.

But first we have to get our minds in a position where we can sort things out. In the beginning, you can listen to what the Buddha has to say about what's skillful and not. You can think about it to the point where it makes sense. But for you to really see for yourself that what the Buddha says is right and really does lead to a true happiness, you've got to develop certain qualities in your mind.

So we're trying to get the mind to be still. Focus on the breath and stay with the breath for the rest of the hour. You can tell your mind to do that. It probably won't. It'll probably wander around a bit, but remind yourself this is really what you want to do. Each time you catch it moving off to something else, you bring it back.

This is home base. For the time being, any thoughts that pull you away from the breath count as unskillful. Any thoughts that help you come back and help you stay here are skillful thoughts. It's not as if when you meditate you have no thoughts at all. You start out with some thinking. The thinking gets more refined as your concentration gets stronger, but in the beginning you have to ride herd on this committee inside the mind that has all kinds of opinions about what you want to do with this hour.

When you focus everything on being right here with the breath, try to notice when you breathe in: Where do you feel it? It may not be in the same place that you think you should feel it, but notice. This is how you learn things, by putting your preconceived notions aside and just looking at what's actually happening.

So: When you breathe in, where do you feel it? There's a movement of energy in lots of different parts of the body. Wherever the movement seems clearest, most blatant, and easiest to follow, focus there. Then, as you breathe in, notice how long the in-breath feels comfortable and when it starts feeling uncomfortable. If it starts feeling uncomfortable, stop. Start breathing out. Then you can breathe out for a while until it gets not comfortable, then stop.

Try to find just the right spot for breathing in, breathing out. The needs of the body may change. One kind of breathing will be good as you try to settle down. As the mind gets further settled down, another type of breathing will feel better. There'll be a tendency to want to go for more refined breathing, which is one of the reasons it's good to start with a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths to get your oxygen levels up. Then find what feels just right: deep/shallow, heavy/light, fast/slow. There are lots of varieties you can play with.

Anything else that comes up right now, you don't want it. If there are pains in different parts of the body, just let them be. You don't have to get involved. Stay with the parts of the body that you can make comfortable. As for the different voices chattering in the mind, don't pay them any attention. They'll say things and do things to pull you away, but you don't want to go anywhere else. You want to get the mind really, really still so that it can see things clearly.

What usually happens is that you find yourself off someplace else and you don't know how you got there. Well, come right back to the breath and be a little more alert the next time.

You want to be able to see the process of how the mind distracts itself, because you're going to learn an awful lot about the mind as you watch that process of distraction. Try to cut it off as quickly as you can.

As soon as you feel another distraction getting ready, what are you going to do? Usually it's a sign that the breath isn't as comfortable as it could be or that your attention is getting a little wobbly. So focus on in, deeper into the breath, and think of the breath permeating deeper into the body so that it feels more nourishing.

Ask yourself if there are any parts of the body where the nourishment from the breath doesn't seem to be extending and see if you can let it go in there: into the heart, deep into the brain. Let the breath nourish everything.

Because when you start looking at the different voices in the mind, the

different urges in the mind, you're going to need to come from a position of comfort, a position of well-being. Otherwise, if you're hungry for pleasure, it's all too easy to give in to the temptation to follow something that's not really skillful. You want some pleasure right now. But if you satisfy that need for pleasure as you stay with the breath, then you can start looking at the different voices in the mind and see that some of the things you used to identify with—where you said, “This is me, this is mine”: They're really not worth it. When the mind is really still and has a sense of well-being, some of these unskillful voices sound unfriendly. You begin to see who's greedy, who's angry, who's jealous, who's... whatever.

And because you're not hungry for whatever they promise, you can distance yourself from them a little bit. This is a really important skill, because otherwise, if you don't learn how to say No to your thoughts, then they can control you at any time. You may be able to fend them off for a little bit, but then the temptation gets strong and you fall for them. So try to keep this sense of well-being going, get the sense of stillness going, so that when things move in the mind, you can see them clearly. That way, you can begin to sort out what's skillful inside and what's not.

One thing you may want to watch for is the level of stress in the mind. Meditation involves some stress as you're trying to get things together, but then as the mind begins to settle down, you begin to realize a lot of the activity you've been engaged in to keep the mind settled in becomes unnecessary. It's as if the center of gravity has shifted and it's easier to stay with the breath. You can step back the amount of energy you put in, but you get the same results in terms of well-being. That's a sign that the mind is really beginning to settle down. You've got your basic principle: You want to be sensitive to the level of stress that you're creating.

The Buddha talks about suffering or stress so that you can see how it comes, see how it goes. See what you're doing to contribute to it. Some kinds of stress in the world are just there because things change. Things are dependent on conditions, and when the conditions change, the things are going to have to change. That's one kind of stress. That doesn't have to weigh on the mind though.

What weighs on the mind is when you cling to things, saying, “This has got to be this way, that's got to be that way, this is me, this is mine.” Remember that those things will change against your will, and that that will lead to suffering. Just the fact that you're clinging, clinging, clinging: There's a lot of stress right there. You want to see this.

And you want to see how the stress comes, see how it goes. To see that, you've got to get the mind really, really still, so that when you do away with some levels of

stress, you find, “Oh, there are subtler ones beneath them” that you didn’t notice before. It’s like trying to get some peace and quiet in your house. You focus on the loud noises first, then when you get rid of those loud noises, you detect subtler ones and deal with those. Once you’ve got rid of them, then you can be quiet for a while until you realize that there’s something even subtler than that going on.

It’s the same with the mind. We’ve got a lot of clinging, a lot of craving. We have to learn how to sort out which desires are skillful and which ones are going to be unskillful.

Right now, the desire to get the mind to settle down is a useful desire, so you stick with it. But there are other desires you have to sort through. It’s not the case that you let everything be and just accept everything, and everything is going to be fine. The Buddha didn’t teach a Dhamma like that. Some things you accept; some things you don’t. Some things you have to get rid of; some things you have to develop. You really have to sort through things in the mind with an eye to what’s causing unnecessary stress. That’s the big issue.

As for other issues that can come up in the mind, you want to learn how to put them aside. This is *the* important one. We like to think that a lot of lights and flashy things will happen in the meditation, and in some people’s meditation these things do happen, but they’re not what the meditation is all about. The meditation is all about seeing where you’re causing unnecessary stress and suffering, and how you can stop. The uncomfortable part of the meditation is when you begin to see your own foolishness in doing certain things and thinking certain things and saying certain things that you think are going to be fun, think are going to gratifying, but they end up causing trouble. These can be blatant or subtle, so you work from the blatant into the subtle.

To sort things out, you’ve got to get the mind quiet. You’ve got to get the mind in a position where it’s not hungry for whatever comes up. And you’ve got to learn to ask the right questions. We’re here to find a happiness that doesn’t change. We’re here to find a happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. That’s the basic principle.

But you have to realize that the mind has lots of urges going in all kinds of different directions. Once you’ve got the mind still, you have to learn how to be a little bit skeptical about whatever else comes up: to see if it really is useful or not, if it is something you want to identify with or not.

This is why the path requires discernment, the ability to see differences like this. If it were just a matter of accepting, accepting, or letting go, letting go, there’d be only one thing to do: There wouldn’t be much need for discernment. You’d just do the one thing: whatever comes up, accept; whatever comes up,

accept. That doesn't require much discernment at all.

But we're in a stage of the practice where you have to make distinctions. You're suffering. You want to stop. In light of that distinction, some actions are skillful; some actions are not. Some actions are more skillful than others. There are gradations.

It requires discernment to see that. The discernment gets sharper the more the mind gets still, the more it has a sense of being well-fed by its concentration. This is why discernment is based on concentration.

So do your best to master this skill, as this is the basis for all the things that you going to learn—that you *need* to learn—to find a happiness that really will be satisfying.