

## *The Hedgefox*

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I've heard there's an old Russian saying that the fox knows many things but knows them superficially, whereas the hedgehog knows one thing but it really knows it well.

When we first study the Dhamma, it's like learning to be a fox: There are four noble truths, five aggregates, five hindrances, five strengths, seven factors for awakening, eight factors in the noble path, fifteen defilements, a hundred and eight different kinds of craving. Seems like an awful lot to know.

If you just stay with the words and the concepts, it's just lots of words and concepts. They seem to have to do very little with what we're doing as we meditate, because meditating is like being a hedgehog: You focus on one breath and you just be with one breath, this breath right now, and get to know it really well.

Actually, the Buddha discovered all those different Dhamma concepts that seem so very foxlike by starting out as a hedgehog: looking at his mind to see if there was still any suffering or stress in there. He focused on learning how to observe the mind really well through mindfulness and concentration. And focusing on that one thing, he began to see that it divided out into lots of little things.

So we can keep those Dhamma concepts in the background, for the time when they will actually apply to what we're experiencing. Meanwhile, we focus on this one thing, and we begin to see how this one thing begins to connect up with other things.

You're focusing on the breath. Is that all there is in your experience right now? Well, no. There are feelings, too: feelings of pleasure that may relate to the breath, or pains, if the breath feels constricted. Or pleasure with the breath and pains in other parts of the body. Then look at who's doing the looking at the breath: There's the perception, the label that helps you to stay moored with the breath. There's the commentary that's running in the back of your mind, "Is this breath good? Is it not? What can I do with the next one? How's your focus? How does this feel?" Lots of different comments, some of which are related to the breath, while others are not.

Finally, there's consciousness, which is aware of all these things: the more passive side of the knowing that simply registers what's there.

So you've got all these things going on here right now. As you get to know the

breath better, and get to know the process of being with the breath better, you begin to see that these things do separate out. You get hands-on practice with the concepts. Sometimes staying with the breath is difficult because you've got a lot of mental chatter going on. Well, see if you can take that chatter and apply it to the breath. If you're going to talk about something to yourself, talk about how the breath is going.

Then you use your perceptions, your imagination to think about what's going on in the body right now and how the breath might possibly go to different parts of the body. Perception, you see, has a huge power over how things work in the body. It's actually one of the ways in which the mind communicates with itself or different parts of the brain communicate with one another. Little images go out and they immediately affect things, often on a subconscious level, like the subliminal messages and images that they sometimes put on very quickly on TV if they want to influence you. Well, the mind does that to itself. If you begin to pick up on this, then you find you can put it to use.

In other words, you're getting hands-on training in the five aggregates. That's when you really get to know them. But if you find that five are too many, you can focus on any one. Perception might be one, feeling might be another.

Learn to be a connoisseur of the feelings that the breath can create. As the Buddha says when he discusses feelings in the establishments of mindfulness, some feelings are just what he calls "feelings of the flesh," i.e., your ordinary, everyday feelings of pleasure, pain, neither-pleasure-nor-pain that are associated with the senses. Then there are feelings not of the flesh. That's what we're after here as we meditate. You start out with pain not of the flesh, i.e., the mental pain that comes when you realize you haven't gotten far in the practice or you haven't gotten as far as you'd like to be in the practice. There's a goal that you haven't attained. And the Buddha says that's actually a pain you want to encourage.

As for pleasures and pains of the flesh, those are more individual matters. Some of these pleasures really have a bad impact on the mind and others are perfectly okay. This is why we don't have the monks totally starved, living in horrible environments in order to wean the mind off of pleasure. That was the Buddha's first approach: to deny himself every kind of pleasure, but he realized that that didn't work. The body needs a certain level of nourishment to practice the path. And as many of the texts say, the beauties of nature can be really conducive to helping the mind settle in. So there are some pleasures that are okay.

Other pleasures are going to have a bad impact on your mind, so you have to be very careful around them. This is something you want to watch: Why do these pleasures have that bad impact? If you get to know them really well, you begin to

see that they're associated with certain perceptions, certain mental fabrications.

So even though you're focused mainly on feelings here, you find that they connect up with the other aggregates. In the beginning, you don't have to think about the other aggregates that much, just get to know your feelings. But then you begin to see, "Oh, it's because I had these perceptions around that pleasure that it causes problems." Or the pleasures have a really bad impact on the body, they weaken the body, weaken your ability to think straight. Okay, you've got to learn how to wean yourself off of those pleasures.

This is where pleasure not of the flesh comes in. You learn how to get the mind into a state of concentration where it can drink the well-being, drink the sense of refreshment that comes when the mind can settle down and, at the very least, be secluded from its sensual desires. It has a chance to rest in seclusion. As it gets more concentrated, the concentration becomes then the basis of the pleasure.

So that's the kind of feeling you want to encourage, so that you can use it. Then when the temptation comes up to give in to sensual pleasures that you know are unskillful, you know you've got something better. The more quickly you can tap into the pleasure not of the flesh, the more effective it's going to be in dealing with the mind's hunger to have an immediately gratifying pleasure right now. "So okay, how about this?!"

Then you begin to notice that mind begins to complain that still it wanted the old pleasure. You have to ask it why, and you begin to realize here's some fabrication going on around the pleasure. Or certain perceptions that go with the idea, "I'm the kind of person who has this pleasure. I'm better than other people who don't have this pleasure." There's a lot of that out in the world.

Like that old commercial for BMW: This guy comes up to a rooftop parking lot and there he sees his own BMW. And he just shivers. The announcer calls it the "BMW chill." It's not so much the feeling of the BMW, it's the perceptions that go around it: that "It's a really classy car" and "I'm a classy person because I drive that car." That kind of thing.

So as you get to know feelings, you begin to realize that they're not there alone. They're connected with other things, other aggregates. But if you find that thinking about all five aggregates is too much, focus just on one, and eventually they connect up. As you get to know this one thing, really know this one thing like the hedgehog, you'll see how there are all these parts and all these connections.

So ultimately you end up as a hedgefox. You know one thing really well and you know all its many aspects and connections. But for the sake of the concentration, for the sake of the seeing things as they're actually happening, you

start with one thing and get to know it really well. Then the more reflective you are about what you're doing, the more you see the connections.

So even though in the beginning you may choose one thing because it's easy to focus on, it may turn out that one of the other aggregates is really the problem. But that's nothing to worry about, because, as I said, they all connect. When you deal with one, you inevitably have to deal with all the rest. But when you start with one, it gives you the foundation you need so you can see all these things clearly. It's only when you see them directly that that knowledge of the terms and concepts will really be of use.