

## *Reflect on Your Actions*

*December 23, 2015*

One of the main purposes of meditation is to get you more sensitive to what your mind is doing while you're doing it, and also to see the results of what you've done so that you can gauge what needs to be changed.

This ability to reflect on your actions is really central to the practice. This is how the Buddha himself gained awakening. He would follow a practice for a while and then look at the results and ask himself, "Is this what I want?" When it didn't come up to his standards, he went back and looked at his actions, "Okay, what am I doing wrong? What could I change?"

This ability to reflect is useful in all aspects of the practice. We learn it in the meditation but we should also learn it in reference to our daily actions.

We were talking today about the tendency to get overly pressured as you're working on a project. Often it comes from the mind's belief that if you don't put a lot of pressure on yourself, the work won't get done or it won't get done well. When the project succeeds, that part of the mind says, "Look, see? It succeeded because I put a lot of pressure on you," and it's going to put pressure on you again. So you have to learn how to observe yourself to see how much pressure actually is useful and how much is wasted effort—and how much actually gets in the way of doing things well.

To some extent, simply looking back on your actions will help. But if you're not present for your actions while you're doing them, you're not really going to know.

So the meditation teaches you to be more present. At the same time, it teaches you to still things down in the mind as much as you can, so that you can detect what those actions are.

When the Buddha teaches alertness, it's not just generally being aware of the present moment. It's being specifically aware of what you're doing and what the results of your actions are.

Like right now: You're sitting, focused on the breath. Is it going well? Are you actually with the breath? If not, what can you change? You can change either the breath or the way you're focused. In other words, the changes can be either in the body or in the mind.

What are your range of options? Some of these you've learned from the past. Others you may want to think up right now. How are you relating to the body? What's your perception of the body? Where are you in the body? Could you be

someplace else? Could you hold a different perception in mind?

What about the breath? How are you perceiving it and how does it feel? When you adjust the breath, what do you do? Are you putting pressure on it to adjust it or are you simply posing a thought in mind, saying, “longer,” and then seeing how the body responds. Which of those is working for you?

There’s a lot of leeway here for your individual preferences, your individual way of relating your mind to your body. And these are things you have to learn by exploring. But it’s also good to have someone you can talk these things over with, to get some ideas you may not have thought of before or to open up some possibilities that might not have occurred to you. Or to be a little more demanding in your sense of what you want—or sometimes less demanding: Sometimes we hold up unrealistic ideals for ourselves on how the mind should be when it settles down in concentration.

If you’ve been hearing about people gaining a sense of light in the concentration and wonder where your light is, you may try to force it and get upset when you don’t get the light. Well, it’s good to know that light doesn’t happen to everybody.

In your case, you may want to look for other signs to indicate that the mind is actually settling down. Is there a sense of well-being, a sense of being settled here? If there is, okay, that’s good enough to hold on to for the time being.

Then the question is, “How do you protect what you’ve got?” All too often there’s the tendency that if you don’t like the concentration you have, you step on it and try something else. The potential you have to get the mind settled down with that first state of concentration gets killed.

So you need a sense of how to judge things: how to look at your actions, how to look at the results, and how to connect the actions to the results.

As Ajaan Lee said, if you see an action but don’t see the result, that’s not really insight. Or if you gain a mind state but you can’t remember what you did to bring it about, that’s not really insight, either. You have to see the results connected to the actions, the actions connected to the results. That’s when you really understand things.

So learn to reflect on what you’re doing right now, as you’re doing it. That’ll make it easier at the end of the meditation to reflect on: When things were going really well, what did you do? Can you do that the next time around?

Sometimes it’s taken you halfway through the meditation session before things finally fall together. Well, do they have to wait halfway the next time? Can you bring them together more quickly the next time, having observed what the breath was like, what the mind was like when they were together well?

Or are you afraid that if you get the mind really concentrated at the beginning of the hour then you're not going to know what to do with the rest of the hour? Well, question that. All you have to do is get it there and then have some patience in keeping it there.

Of course, voices will come up in the mind and say, "This is getting boring. Nothing's happening. Where are the insights? Where's the...", whatever. You can tell yourself, "I'm just looking for a state of mind that I can maintain," and see how long you can ride with it. Because the longer you can ride with it, the more you're going to see how you got things stilled to begin with.

It's like trying to listen to a very subtle sound off in the distance. If you've got a lot of noise in your immediate surroundings, you're not going to hear it. So you've got to calm things down. You have to make yourself really quiet and get rid of all the extraneous noise.

As you're meditating, getting the mind quiet here with the breath, that's what you're doing: You're getting rid of the extraneous noise in the mind so that you can see more precisely what you're doing, what the results are, where your intentions are right now, and what happens when you carry those intentions through.

So when you come out of the meditation, one, as I said, you want to reflect on how the meditation went. Then, two, as you leave meditation, you want to look at what the mind picks up as it leaves.

Learn to see that as strange. We live with our normal level of pressure in the mind, our normal conversations in the mind, and everything seems very normal and taken for granted. Often we can't imagine what the mind would be like without that particular level of pressure or type of conversation.

But if you can see it as strange, you can detect times when you're just piling unnecessary stress on yourself. Or you're beating yourself over something that's really not worth it. Or whatever the unskillful attitude is: You'll see it more clearly as you come out of a state of stillness.

This makes you more sensitive to the ordinary workings of the mind. You see that they don't have to be there. At the very least, this gives you a sense that things can be changed, things could be different.

Sometimes you'll even have some insights into precisely what it is that's weighing the mind down unnecessarily. You can see that you don't have to go there, there's an alternative. When you can see the alternative, that's when you really benefit.

You're putting the mind in a better place to judge things. But without this sense of well-being that comes from the stillness, the mind's going to be hungry

and it's going to be noisy.

So we're feeding the mind on good food: good feelings, good contact of the breath with the various elements of the body, the feelings of ease and well-being and rapture that come as a result, and the intentions that keep you here. These are all healthy forms of food for the mind.

As you get more and more used to health food for the mind, then when you see the mind beginning to go back to junk food again, you notice it. You're changing your diet.

At first, the mind is strongly inclined to go back to its old diet. But as it stays with the new diet, over time its sense of what's healthy inside will change. Its sense of what's normal inside will change. You realize you have a lot of alternatives that you might not have thought of before.

So reflect on your actions while you're concentrating and as you're coming out of concentration. Reflect on your meditation; reflect on what you're picking up as you leave concentration.

This will help you reflect on all the other issues going on in your life, such as the way you approach a project and the way you learn how to handle it so that it's not placing unnecessary pressure on yourself, unnecessary stress. That way, you can do the work that you have to do in the world more efficiently. The mind will have more strength left over to deal with the other issues that come up.

There are a lot of things going on in life that have nothing to do with the projects we're assigned or the projects we take on. We've got our greed, aversion, and delusion in the background. If you put all your energy into focusing on your project, the greed, aversion, and delusion get to run rampant. They might stay within the bounds of the project that needs to be done, but as soon as the project is accomplished or you feel that you can let up a little bit, they come in and take over.

If you've been expending a lot of strength on the project, you won't have the strength to deal with these things. You need to have a reserve of strength to keep these things at bay even when the outside pressure is off or the internalized pressure gets calmed down.

So again, the meditation is useful for giving you strength. You want to learn how to develop, as much as you can, this sense of being here, present, alert, ardent and mindful, centered in the body. That makes you a much better judge of what you're doing right now and how it can be improved.