

What Am I Becoming as Days & Nights Fly Past?

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As you practice, you have to have a good sense of an inner teacher, someone who's watching over what you're doing and correcting you when you're going off course. That, in fact, is one of the functions of mindfulness: to remind you of what the course is. This is why the Buddha compares mindfulness to a goad.

As you may remember, a goad is a long stick with a pointed end. In the old days, farmers would have water buffaloes pull their plows, and if a water buffalo started going off course, you'd take the stick and you poke it to get it back on course. If it was turning to the right, you'd poke it on the right to make it go left. If it was turning to the left, you'd poke it on the left to head it toward the right, to keep it from going away from the row you're trying to plow.

While you're meditating, you need this same kind of mindfulness to look after you because, after all, no one else is looking into your mind right now, and even people who can read minds can't be reading your mind all the time. You've got to be reading your own mind. When the story starts getting a little strange, you have to bring in other characters to straighten it back out, to goad it back in the right direction. This inner teacher is a really good character to have on hand.

So what kind of questions does the inner teacher ask? What kinds of comments does the inner teacher make?

One of the questions is included in the ten things that everyone who has gone forth should think about—and this applies to all of us here. As Ajaan Suwat once commented, taking the eight precepts counts as going forth, too.

The question is: What am I becoming as days and nights fly past, fly past?

In other words, how are you changing? In what direction are you developing? Are you just staying stuck in your old ways or are you moving in a good new direction? Look at the kind of person you're becoming in your thoughts, your words, and your deeds, to see if that's the kind of person you continue wanting to be.

As the Buddha said, if you want to make progress on the path, you can't stay content with your skillful qualities, much less with your unskillful ones. Often we defend our unskillful qualities by saying, "Well, that's just the way I am." It's better to try to tweak that verb "I am" more in the direction of "that's the way I've become," the implication being that you don't have to stay that way. You've been changing. Things can change. You can make things change in a better direction.

So think in terms of “becoming” rather than just “being.” It’s a process going on here, and you don’t want it to be a process of just solidifying and growing stagnant.

Ask yourself: “What are the ways in which I can improve? How would I like to be able to answer that question tomorrow and then the next day and then the next day, so that there’s a better answer every day?”

In some cases, the better answer will come with the fact that your meditation is going better. In others, it will have more to do with the way we’re interacting with one another here—because that’s part of the practice too.

You notice that in the eight factors of the path, there’s right speech and right action. In the Buddha’s list of qualities that he taught to Gotami about what counts as Dhamma and what doesn’t count as Dhamma, some of the qualities have to do with the goal at which you’re aiming: You’re aiming at being unfettered, you’re aiming at dispassion. Some of them have to do with qualities that you develop within yourself, like arousing your persistence. But others have to do with how you interact with other people so that you’re not a burden on them. You can actually be a good friend to them—a good example in the practice, and someone who encourages them in their practice, too. At the very least, you’re not getting in the way.

Remember, we don’t take a vow of silence here at the monastery, but it’s good to think that when you’re breaking silence, there has to be a reason for it. You hope that other people are working on their minds, and you don’t want to disturb that. You disturb it only when it’s really necessary, keeping your speech in line with right speech, and your actions in line with right action.

As for your internal effort, that’s right effort. It’s interesting that when the Buddha lists the four customs of the noble ones, the one custom that directly relates to the noble eightfold path is the very last one—to delight in abandoning and to delight in developing—and that relates directly to right effort. He’s highlighting right effort as a custom of the noble ones.

This means that you look at your mind, and whatever you see there that’s unskillful, you try to abandon it—and then you try and make sure it doesn’t come back.

Which means that when you’re meditating, it’s not just a matter of being here in the present moment. Sometimes, toward the end of the meditation, you might want to think about difficult situations that may come up in the course of the day, cases in which you’ve been behaving in an unskillful way in the past, and you can pose the question in the mind: How can you avoid behaving that same way over and over again? Give some thought to that.

As for skillful qualities, if you look around and don't see many inside, you have to regard yourself as poor—but that doesn't mean they're not there. It's just that the potentials haven't been developed. So you look for the potentials and you nurture them. As the Buddha said, there is the potential for calm both in the body and in the mind. Look for it. Where is a calm spot in the body? If you don't sense it immediately, just think of the fact we've got bones. Bones are pretty calm. They don't get upset or excited about things. Think about your bones and make your mind like earth, as the Buddha taught to Rahula. Bones are about as earthy as you can get in the body: solid, unmoving. See if you can develop that quality of being solid and unmoving as touchstone for the kind of quality you want to find in your mind.

It's there. There's a still part of the mind and there are still points in the body. Try to nurture them. That way, you have a sense of solidity inside so that you're not blown around so easily by what happens around you or by your own moods. The potentials for skillful qualities, the potential for good things inside, are there. You want to nurture them. You want them to become as well.

So if the Buddha were to appear in front of you—that was one of Ajaan Fuang's questions one time: "If the Buddha were here right now and he asked you 'Days and nights fly past, fly past, what are you becoming?' how would you answer him? How could you behave so that when you give the answer it's true and it's something you can be proud of?"

Keep that point in mind: that what you think you "are" is simply a product of becoming, which means you're not stuck there and you can't use it as an excuse saying, "Well, I can't practice because I'm stuck here. This is just the way I am."

You've got to move on. This is what you've become so far, and it's the result of actions, it's the result of mental fabrications and all the processes that we hear about all the time in the Buddha's analysis of what the mind is up to.

So put some effort into delighting in developing good qualities. Make that your pleasure, because what's the pleasure of just being stuck with the way you are? It's a lazy pleasure. You want to take pleasure in mastering a skill, in pushing yourself in areas that are not necessarily easy but are rewarding.

There's that saying that you don't have to have hope for a success in order to put in effort. The actual principle is that you put in the effort, and if the results don't come quickly, they will come at some point. There *is* that hope. Just keep putting in as much good energy as you can, take as much delight as you can in abandoning and developing.

That's how you can give a noble answer to that question of what you're becoming as days and nights fly past.