

What You're Bringing

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A lot of what happens in meditation depends on what you bring to it. There are the things we consciously bring to it and there are the other things that we bring to it unconsciously, that we're not aware of. So it's important that you make your conscious intention as clear as possible. This is why Ajaan Lee would often start his meditations with a vow, "I'm going to sit here and I'm going to stay with the breath." Or, "I'm going to sit here and focus on this or that issue and not let the mind waver from it." So make up your mind: You're going to stay with the breath and you're going to bring your full attention to it. When your intention and attention are clear, then anything that deviates is going to be clear as well. You notice it as a deviation. You remember, "This is something I want to get away from, something I want to drop; someplace I don't want to go." And you have that choice.

It's not the case that a thought pulls you away with some sort of magnetic power. You're actually the one who pursues things. But again, it's based on the things you bring to the meditation. In this case, it might be something that's lying around there unconsciously in an area you're not aware of. So be prepared for the fact that things will come bubbling up out of the mind and can pull you off course.

To strengthen your intention, you want to work with the breath in a way that makes it as interesting as possible. When the breath comes in, where exactly do you feel it? Only in the places where you thought you might feel it, or are there other places as well? Where does the energy flow? Do you feel breath energy coming down through the shoulders? Sometimes that happens. Sometimes it's coming in from the front; sometimes in from the back. Different places in the body might feel the breath as it's just beginning to come in before other parts of the body feel it. So try to notice that.

Get more and more familiar with the territory of your body as you feel it from within. And learn to think of every sensation in the body as an aspect of the breath. So if there's warmth, it's part of warm breathing. If there's solidity, ask yourself if it's not just something really solid in the body, but if it's a blockage in the breath energy. There are things you put up with, telling yourself, "Well, that's my bone or my muscle. It's got to feel solid." But then you might notice if you thought of it as breath energy, is it something you'd want to put up with, that solidity there? You might suddenly experience it as a blockage. That opens up the

possibility that perhaps you can work around the blockage or through it. See what that does.

The purpose of all this is to get the mind to settle in to that spot where the Buddha says you're aware of the whole body as you breathe in and aware of the whole body as you breathe out.

And you can calm the effect that the breath has on the body. Before you can bring it to calm, though, you have to gain a sense of refreshment from the breathing. Otherwise, if you calm things down, it just gets stultifying. So breathe in a way that gives you energy first; that holds your interest, feels good. Parts of the body that were tired and lacking in energy suddenly find that they have some more energy. It's more and more pleasant to sit here and just sit here, breathing.

What you're doing is bringing awareness to an area of your body that tends to be in the shadows: the body as you feel it from within; parts of the body that you ordinarily don't pay any attention to. Now you can pay attention to them. You don't have any other responsibilities right now. And you've got that original intention: You want to stay with the breath for the hour. This is how you do it. You give the mind something to play with, and it'll be content to stay for the hour. You've probably noticed that when you work on a task that has you absorbed, time passes very quickly. That's how it should be with the concentration. Get absorbed, and the hour won't feel like a whole hour. What you're doing is bringing some awareness not only to the body, but also to parts of the mind that tend not to be lit up with any awareness; that tend to hide in the shadows.

We were talking today about dependent co-arising. And one of the most important features about dependent co-arising is the fact that there are so many steps that happen before sensory contact: in other words, what you bring to the situation. And the reason why what we bring to the situation causes suffering is because it's all done in ignorance. So when we meditate, we're trying to shine a light into that area, both for the body and in the mind.

The thing about ignorance, though, is that it's not just an empty space. We have our ways of filling in the details. We think we know about what's going on in the mind because we have a sketch. We have our ideas and theories about what's going on in the mind, and they seem to be knowledge. So we don't even know that they're ignorance. Ajaan Lee makes this point many times. He says it's not the case we don't know. It's simply that we have a kind of knowledge that's not helpful in putting an end to suffering.

So when we turn a light on what we're bringing to our experience, it involves two things: one, noticing what's going on; and then two, looking at it in terms of

the four noble truths and their duties. In fact, that's what ignorance is defined as: ignorance of the four noble truths and their duties. So knowledge would be bringing those four truths to bear on what's happening to you right now. Like when we're working with the breath: If there's a sense of dis-ease in the breath, you do what you can to alleviate that. That's taking the basic framework of the four noble truths and applying it directly to the breath. You see where there's stress and you try to figure out what's causing it. Then you attack the cause so that you can put an end to the stress.

You want to learn how to do that not only with the breath, but also with the mind. You notice that when the Buddha describes the factors that come prior to sensory contact, he doesn't say things like greed, aversion, and delusion. Just things like intention and attention and perceptions and feelings. Now, this doesn't mean there isn't any greed, aversion, or delusion in there. There certainly is quite a lot. But we don't see those factors in terms of just being feelings and perceptions. They have a lot more meaning for us and we cling to the meaning.

A large part of seeing things in terms of the four noble truths is to strip these unskillful mental states of their meaning. As in the case of pride: Part of the mind will say, "Pride is something really necessary. If I don't have a certain amount of pride, then I get overcome by other people. I get pushed around." So we hold on to it. But when you begin to see that there's stress in holding on, you're beginning to get on the right track.

The next thing you have to see is that this is something to be comprehended. When you find the cause, then you try to abandon it. Here again, part of the mind balks. If it's something that we feel possessive of, we're not going to see it in those terms. And we're not going to think that the duties that the Buddha assigns to them apply to us right now: "My greed, my lust, my aversion, my pride, my fear, my jealousy, whatever: It's a special case." That's what we think. "I need these things. There's nothing wrong with them. Or if there's something wrong with them, all I have to do is tinker with them a little bit. But I'm not going to let them go." But, as I was saying last night, it's only when you see that there's some unnecessary stress there and you're causing it: That's when you're willing to see that the stress is really not worth it and to learn to change your attitudes. The pride or the aversion: The effort that goes into maintaining those things doesn't get the payoff that you want.

So once you recognize that you're bringing something to the present moment, the next step is to see where it fits in those four noble truths. And then ask yourself, "What's the duty of that particular truth? Is it something to be comprehended, or is it something to be abandoned?" Eventually, everything is

going to be abandoned, but there are some things that you have to comprehend first; some things you have to develop first. You develop the path. You develop more mindfulness, more alertness. You develop your ability to take that pride, or that greed, or that lust or aversion, or whatever, and take it apart, to see: Okay, where is it a case of perception? What role does perception play there?—in other words, the labels you’re putting on things, the images you have in the back of the mind, the things that come up from the lizard brain that tend to circulate a lot around greed and fear.

And where can you see that those perceptions are really off? What are the feelings or the acts of intention or attention? Learn to take things apart in these terms. It helps to de-personalize them, seeing them in this way. It makes it a lot easier to take them apart. Otherwise, you can often get involved in terms of recriminations. “I shouldn’t be a greedy person. I shouldn’t be an angry person. I shouldn’t be a proud person.” Well, take those thoughts apart as well. They’re just perceptions turned into fabrications. That’s all they are. When you can see them as that’s all they are, then it’s a lot easier to let them go, because they’re de-personalized. Otherwise, it’s very hard to let them go.

But when you see these are just instances of what the Buddha was saying—fabrications of different kinds that are done in ignorance—you’re now bringing some knowledge to them. You see them as they’re happening and you see them in terms of the four noble truths. And you realize that the duties really do apply and they really are for your own good: that that particular instance of pride or lust or anger is something that really should be abandoned. You have comprehend it first, though, to see that there’s stress in there.

And you want to comprehend exactly what is giving rise to the stress. You want to see it as it’s happening so that you can see what the connections are. The quicker you are to see these things, the more you’re able to identify them properly. All too often we know that we have greed but we don’t know why. Or we think we know why, but we’re slightly off target. We’ve mis-perceived our own greed. We’ve mis-perceived our own pride or anger.

And because of the mis-perception, we can’t apply the duties properly. You tell yourself, “Well, I have to let go of that perception.” But if you let go of it and it doesn’t solve the problem, that means that the perception wasn’t really the lynchpin for all these things. So you’ve got to trace things down carefully. Be as precise as you can to see, “Oh, this is what gives rise to that.” And when you can see how stupid it is, that’s how you let go.

As long as you don’t see your stupidity, there’s no way that you’re going to gain discernment. This is not to say that you are a stupid person. It’s just that that

particular connection in your mind was a stupid connection. If you tell yourself, “I am a fool,” that’s one thing. If you tell yourself, “I’ve been acting foolishly,” that’s something else. When you can finally get it down to actions, “That’s a foolish action”: That’s the best way to look at things. The fact that you could recognize it as foolish: That’s a good sign. You learn to do this by de-personalizing all the processes. That makes it a lot easier to let them go.

So we’re working here on getting to know what we’re bringing to the present moment. And the best way to do that is to consciously bring a skillful attitude to the present moment and then see what else comes up that gets in the way of your express intention for being here.

It’s like trying to know the strength of a current in a river. The best way to do that is put a dam up in the river, or at least try. You run up against some currents you may not have known were there. If you just look at the surface of the river, you have no idea what the currents are under the surface. That’s what you’re doing if you just sit here noting what’s coming up in the mind and being present with it, but without digging down and asking a few questions. If you don’t have a specific intention to stay right here with the breath, if you tell yourself, “I’ll just let the mind just drift around with whatever current comes up,” then you’re going to know the currents on the surface, but not in the depths.

So you have to set up an intention: Make a vow to yourself that you’re going to stay right here regardless. That’s when the various forces that you’re bringing to the present moment will come more to the surface. They’re forced to, because they’ve run up against the wall. They’ve run up against the dam you’ve set here.

So make your vow explicit and firm. And then do whatever you can to stick with it. That’s how you learn all the other things that are going on in the mind as well.