

Insight Is Seeing What's Worth Doing

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Try to stay focused on the breath, wherever you feel it most vividly. If you don't know where it's most vivid, take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Let it calm down until it feels just right—not too heavy to be comfortable, but not so light that you can't follow it.

And don't put too much pressure on it; don't put too little pressure on it. The Buddha's image is of a person holding a baby chick in his hand. If you squeeze the chick too tightly, it's going to die. If you hold it too loosely, it's going to fly away. So try to keep tabs on the breath with just the right amount of pressure.

If you catch the mind wandering off, just bring it back. No matter how many times it's going to wander off in the course of the hour, bring it back, bring it back. Each time you come back, reward yourself with a breath that feels really gratifying, because you want to get the mind to feel good about being here so it'll be more likely to settle in and wander off less.

The less the mind wanders, the more subtle things you'll be able to see. You begin to see when there's the beginning of a stirring that it's going to go out. You can breathe right through it, right in time so that you don't have to leave. You don't have to come back. You're right here. Then you'll be able to see subtle movements of the mind even more clearly—and even more subtle movements as the mind settles down more deeply. This is the whole point of concentration practice: You want to see what you're doing.

In the beginning, you're doing two things: One, you're trying to stay with the breath; and two, you're trying to wean the mind off its attraction to its distractions. Then, as you settle in, it's more of just what you're doing right now, i.e., staying with the breath. When you can see that clearly, you'll see a lot of subtle things you never saw in the mind before. And that's where insight comes in.

As the Buddha said, discernment begins when you ask the question of someone who seems reliable: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" Now you can interpret that on an external level, but you can also interpret it on an internal level. The external level is the practice of merit. Generosity leads to long-term welfare and happiness. Virtue leads to long-term welfare and happiness. Developing attitudes of universal goodwill in the mind leads to long-term welfare and happiness. Those are attitudes and actions you

want to develop because they help you see more clearly how your actions have an impact on your life. As you act in more skillful ways, life becomes a lot lighter. You feel a lot better about yourself.

There are a lot of people out there who, when they're feeling bad about themselves, go see a therapist. And what the therapist should tell them is, "Go out and do something good. Go out and help somebody. Try to be more principled in your actions." A lot of genuine self-esteem would come from that.

It's the same with thoughts of goodwill. You begin to realize you're living in the world without having any ill will for anyone, and you can base a genuine sense of self-esteem on that. Of course, it takes time to develop that attitude. It's not like we're born with limitless goodwill, but you can practice. You can ask yourself, "What is goodwill?" It's a wish for happiness. Well, where does happiness come from? It comes from actions. So when you're wishing for your own happiness, you're hoping that you'll act skillfully. When you're wishing for the happiness of others, you're hoping that *they* will act skillfully. And that's a wish you can have for everybody.

Now, some people on your list are beasts. You might say, "Well, I'd like to see that person suffer a little bit more before they're happy." But it doesn't really accomplish anything. Even with people who are really cruel and doing a lot of damage in the world, you can wish them goodwill because you want them to understand true happiness and act on it. They'd have to change their actions for the better.

When you can take that attitude, you're more able to trust yourself in your dealings with other people, and you feel better about yourself. Other people can trust you more, and you can trust yourself more—all from just changing the way you act, changing the way you think. This is why they say that the practice of merit is really helpful in the meditation, because it gets you more sensitive to your actions and the power of your actions.

As you get the mind deeper in concentration, it's the same issue: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" Okay, get the mind really still. And begin to notice how the mind puts mind-states together. You can see it both as you create the mind-state of concentration and as you see the mind slipping off and creating other mind-states on the side. These mind-states will be related to the way you breathe, they'll be related to the way you think to yourself about things, the way you talk to yourself about things, and the perceptions and feelings you focus on. All these things are what the Buddha calls fabrication. He says we engage in fabrication in ignorance, which is why we suffer. But when we can do it with knowledge, it becomes part of the path.

As for anything that pulls you away from the path, you can ask yourself, “Will this lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” If you’re honest with yourself, the answer is No. And the next step of discernment is that even though you may like the distractions, you have to ask yourself, “What can I do so I don’t want to go with them? How can I talk myself out of following the distractions? And how can I talk myself into sticking with the meditation even when it gets difficult at times?”

That’s another aspect of discernment, because what it comes down to is a question of what’s worth doing. The mind is always doing. It’s an active principle. We don’t just sit here and receive things passively. We’re out there looking for things. Why? The mind is hungry. It’s been looking after this hungry body, and it’s hungry itself. It likes sensory input. It likes thoughts. It likes intentions. It feeds off these things. So the question is always, “What’s good food?” —i.e., what’s worth doing, because the mind is a doing thing, not just a sitting-around-passive thing. It’s a doing thing. So the big question is, “What’s worth doing?” And that question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” gives focus. The wisdom lies in the realization that, yes, happiness will depend on your actions, long-term is possible, and it’s better than short-term.

But the terms of the question can also get translated into another teaching: the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. Look at “my long-term welfare and happiness.” If something is inconstant, it’s not long-term. If something is stressful, it’s not “welfare and happiness.” And if it’s neither welfare-and-happiness nor long-term, why would you want to identify with it as “mine”?

There you’ve got the seeds for the three perceptions. They’re a test of that question: What’s worth doing? When you’re working with your concentration, the concentration is what’s worth doing. The distractions are not. And you want to learn to see them as inconstant, stressful, and not-self as a way of getting some dispassion for them so you can see that they’re not worth it and free yourself from them.

As the concentration develops and the field gets more and more clear, then you start looking at the concentration itself. You begin to see that this, too, has its ups and downs. This, too, is inconstant. This, too, has levels of stress that rise and fall. You want to look and see what it is that causes them to rise and fall, because they’re now the disturbance there. So as the Buddha said, when you master concentration, the next step is to see that it, too, is composed of aggregates. And it, too, doesn’t pass the test of these three perceptions.

When it really hits home that you want something better than even concentration can provide in terms of a steady, satisfying happiness, that’s when

the mind turns to something deathless. If it can really let go at that point, that's a moment of awakening. Then you realize that what you did then: That was worth doing. And when the awakening is full, then you can put everything aside.

Now, notice those questions: When the Buddha asks, "Is this constant or inconstant?" well, it's inconstant. "Is something that's inconstant stressful or easeful?" It's stressful. "If something is inconstant and stressful, is it worth holding on to as me, myself, or what I am?" Notice the conclusion he comes to, asking if it's worth it, because the way we have a sense of self is an activity, too. There are times in the practice when selfing activity is really worthwhile. After all, it's a healthy sense of self that gets you to be generous. It's a healthy sense of self that gets you to be virtuous and develop goodwill. It's a healthy sense of self that gets you on the meditation cushion and meditating. It's only at the final stage when you can let even that healthy selfing go.

In the meantime, what you let go of are the selves that would pull you away from the path. You've got lots of selves inside, lots of selves that you've been creating and nurturing, and those are the ones that you now let fall away. You learn how not to identify with them. Some of them are going to be hard to let go of because they have their hooks on you. But it's when you can see that these are activities that are not worth doing, that's when you let go. So the conclusion is not, "Is there a self?" The conclusion is, "These things are not worth holding on to." It's a very different kind of conclusion.

To say that there's no self is to make a metaphysical statement. Some people say, "Well, if you see there's no self, then there's no more attraction for anything, and you let go." That doesn't work. If you say there's no self, then who's going to do the practice? Why would there be any point in practicing at all? And to say that in seeing everything as inconstant, you let go, is like saying you see that food is inconstant and your stomach is inconstant, so you're just not going to eat any more. As long as the mind is hungry, as long as it sees that certain activities are worth doing, it's going to keep doing them regardless of whether you've slapped a label of self or not-self on them. It's when you see the activity is no longer worth it, that there's something better, *that's* when you let go.

Again, the conclusion is not, "There is no self." The conclusion is that these things are not worth holding on to. These things are not worth identifying with. You know that the insight has gone deeply enough when it opens to a different dimension where there's no time and there's no space. This is why it's called deathless because there's nothing there that can die. You need time in order to die, but this is outside of time. You come back from that and you realize, "Okay,

the Buddha was right. There is that dimension. And the path that took you there: That was really worth it.”

As long as you still have more stages of awakening to attain, okay, you’re going to stick with the path. But your relationship with the world has changed. It’s like the moon getting into a resonance. They call that a place in the moon’s orbit when its velocity is such and its movement is such that if you were to draw up some equations describing its trajectory, one of the numbers would be divided by 0. And at that moment, if something is divided by 0, you can’t predict where it’s going to happen. And it changes the relationship.

With final awakening, then it totally changes the relationship. Nothing has any more claws on the mind. Nothing has any more hooks on the mind. That’s really worth discovering. At that point, everyone who’s been there says that the question of self and not-self doesn’t come up. After all, “self” and “not-self” are perceptions. You let them go because you find something more solid, more real, and more valuable.

So insight is a value judgment. And you learn to make yourself, as you meditate, a more reliable judge of what’s worth doing, what’s not, what your values really are, and what kind of actions, when you do them, lead to long-term welfare and happiness—the ones that pass the test. When you gain that, you don’t have to be told by anybody that you’ve gained anything in particular. After all, who told the Buddha that he was awakened? He hit that, and he knew.

That’s the quality of this attainment. It doesn’t depend on what anybody says. You see the suffering you created for yourself in the past is no longer there. And there’s no more potential for it. So how can you help but realize that this is really worth it?