

Mind Reading

May 11, 2020

As the Buddha said, even if you can't read the minds of others, make sure at the very least that you can read your own mind. This is something you have to do at the beginning of a meditation. Get a sense of what shape your mind is in right now. One way of testing it is to get into the breath. See how well it stays. Then learn to read it. Does it have too much energy? Too little? Is it beset by worries? Or are you suddenly thinking about something that somebody did to you today or in previous days? That can get you worked up. In other words, if the state of the mind is getting in the way of your staying with breath, you're going to have to focus in on the mind first.

This is the purpose of that third tetrad in the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation. The fact that it's placed third, and we're dealing with steps 9, 10, 11, and 12 in the Buddha's instructions for focusing on the breath, may lead you to think that you have to wait to deal with the breath first, and then with feelings, and finally get to the mind. That's not the case. It's not the case that you start out just with the breath and then you add feelings, and then you add the mind. The mind is right there all along, and if the mind can't focus on the breath, you can't get anything done. As the Buddha said, you try to be sensitive to the state of the mind. If it has too much energy, you deal with it one way; if it has too little energy, you deal with it in another way.

For most of us, the problem is it has too little energy, especially when we're meditating in the evening, at the end of the day. So the first step is to gladden the mind.

You can do that several ways. One is by the way you breathe. Breathe in a way that feels refreshing, energizing. Or you can gladden the mind with different perceptions. This is what the recollections are for. Recollect the Buddha, the fact he was an excellent human being. He left behind a teaching for us, and we're privileged to be able to practice it. It's not the case that everybody has this opportunity. For most people, the pressures of the world are pressing so hard on them that they don't have time. But here we have the time; we have the place. So take advantage of this privilege while you've got it.

The recollection of the Dhamma: This is an excellent teaching. You look at it, you read through it, and you see that it's teaching you nothing but noble things, noble ways of behaving, responsible ways of behaving. That's something timelessly true. It's as true now as it was in the time of the Buddha.

Or you can recollect the Sangha. If you read through the Theragatha and Therigatha, you find that the people in the past had lots of problems, many of them very similar to yours, sometimes even worse, and yet they were able to overcome them. They found the strengths within them to overcome their problems, and you can tell yourself that if they can do it, you can do it, too.

In other words, you use various perceptions to lift the mind, energize the mind, gladden the mind.

After all, here we are in a world where there has been a Buddha. We're coming up on the anniversary of the Buddha's cremation. It was seven days after the Visakha full moon that the Mallans finally got around to cremating the Buddha's remains. The original plan was to cremate him on the first day, but they spent so much time making pavilions, getting their act together, and beginning in their songs and dances in honor of the Buddha that evening came. They realized it was too late in the day for a cremation. They said, "We'll do it tomorrow." The second day, they spent so much time all day long in songs and dances and ceremonies in honor of the Buddha that they ran out of time. This kept up until finally the seventh day they got their act together, earlier in the morning.

As the Buddha had told Ven. Ananda, after he was cremated, his ashes should be collected in a burial mound. It would be a place for people to come and develop a sense of confidence—*pasada* is the Pali term. It's ironic that in the commentaries and the Thai traditions I learned, the places where the ashes are kept, along with other places associated with the Buddha—the places where he was born, where he was awakened, where he gave his first sermon, where he passed away—are all called *samvejjaniya sathan*, which means places for giving rise to samvega, the idea being that even a great person like the Buddha would have to pass away. That's grounds for samvega.

But the Buddha himself said that these are places where one should develop *pasada*, a sense of confidence. We live in the world, yes, where there is suffering, but we live in a world where a Buddha has gained awakening and left his teachings behind on how to put an end to suffering, and the teachings are still alive. Use that thought to give yourself a sense of confidence, a sense of uplifting joy: calm joy, but joy nevertheless. Joy over the fact that the way is still open.

These are some perceptions you can use to gladden the mind.

If, however, you find the mind is too active, too wired, you've got to steady it. Here again you might use different ways of breathing to make it feel more steady and concentrated. Or again, you can use different thoughts, different perceptions. Death is riveting. Recollect death: You can die at any time, so you've got to get your act together now. Suppose you were to die tonight. Would you be ready to

go? The answer is usually No. Okay, there's work to be done. Or if the mind has extra energy, use it to think about the different aspects of the breath in the body. Where's the breath in the spaces between your fingers right now, the spaces between the toes, other parts of the body that you tend to ignore? Take a really detailed inventory of the breath energy in the different parts of the body. Or you can think of the 32 parts of the body. Visualize each one, one by one. Ask yourself, where is that part right now? As long as the mind has energy to think, think about things in the body. That will lasso it in so that you can get it focused.

Another step, the Buddha says, is releasing the mind. One of the worst situations you could be in as you meditate is to go from thinking, thinking, thinking, to falling asleep. The mind tends to go back and forth between the two. You finally get it to calm down, and once it's calmed down, you lose your focus. You've got to release it from both sides. A lot of times, this is a sign of a lack of energy. You can't control the mind. You're too weak or tired to stop it, which is why you're thinking. This is not thinking from a lot of energy, it's thinking from a lack of energy. You don't have much control over it. The mind just starts spinning all kinds of nonsense. When it runs out of steam, then you fall asleep.

I've found in cases like this that good heavy breathing is good. Of course, as you're sitting here in a group, you don't want to engage in loud breathing. Think of long, deep breathing. This to energize the body and energize the mind.

You'll find that you have to develop your own techniques, but these are the three things you want to look for: At what time does the mind need to be gladdened, what times it needs to be steadied, and what times does it need to be released? Then work out the appropriate remedy, until everything gets brought into balance and you can stay with the breath properly.

Even here, you have to learn how to read the mind. Once the mind settles down, there will still be things nibbling away at it. How do you make sure that you don't get distracted by the little nibbling thoughts? And secondly, how do you learn how to analyze your concentration? Because as you get deeper into concentration, it's not simply a matter of just using more force. You have to understand, "What is it that I'm holding on to in this level of concentration that's keeping it from getting deeper?" This is another area where you have to think about releasing the mind.

Learn to sense at what point you don't have to do anymore directed thought and evaluation about the breath. It's as good as it's going to be. Then just focus in on one point, and dedicate the mind to develop a sense of being at one with the breath. What perceptions help you with that? What perceptions help you get so that the need for in-and-out breathing gets lighter and lighter? When the breath

stops, what perception do you hold in mind so that you don't get afraid? Because there will be that reaction. You suddenly realize you haven't been breathing for a while and you think that something's wrong. Actually, nothing's wrong. What's happened is that the mind has gotten so still that you don't need all that extra oxygen. The breath energy in the different parts of the body connects, so that if there's a felt lack in one spot, the energy from another spot can come in and fill up the lack. You don't need to pull anything in from outside.

After a while, because everything is still, the sense of the shape of the body will disappear. Then you realize the only thing keeping you with that sense of form in the body is your image of the boundary of the body. Can you locate the act of the mind that's creating that image? Can you erase it? Drop it? Replace it with a perception of space permeating the body and going out in all directions?

It's in this way that getting the mind into concentration requires reading the mind, and getting into deeper levels of concentration also requires reading the mind. It's simply that you get more and more into the fine print. The Buddha gives you directions in the steps of breath meditation. He talks about being sensitive to mental fabrication, which are feelings and perceptions: both the question of what kind of perceptions can you use to cut through your hindrances, and then, once the mind has settled down, what perceptions can you use to bring the mind into deeper and deeper levels of concentration? You're seeing how feelings and perceptions really do have an impact on the state of your mind. And that's an important insight.

The forest ajaans talk a lot about how we don't need to contemplate all five aggregates. You can focus on one, and the lessons you learn about one particular aggregate will then seep into the others. Perception tends to be the aggregate they focus on most. What image are you holding in mind? How do you understand what's going on there? Which images are you holding that are useful, which ones are you holding on to that are not useful?

The problem with perceptions is that we mistake them for the reality. Actually, they shape our take on reality. The Buddha's image is that perceptions are like mirages. They look like something real, but you get there and there's nothing. It's just an image. A lot of times, that's what we're dealing with in life. When there's anger in the mind, there's usually an image, and the image is what provokes the anger. When we're feeling lust, we've created image in the mind. Lust often has very little to do with the actual body you're thinking about, and more to do with the image. The same with all the defilements.

The practice of concentration gets us very sensitive to how we're playing with images, and how the images have a different impact on the mind. You can begin to

question their role not only while you're sitting here doing concentration, but also as you go into the world. What are the images that are driving you crazy?

This why the Buddha says that the cause of suffering is inside. The world may be horrible, but that's not what's making us suffer. It's what the mind is doing with the input from the world, good or bad. A large part of what we're doing is applying perceptions that then aggravate problems.

So you want to learn how to master this issue of perception. Don't mistake the perception for the reality outside—or the realities inside. Just ask yourself, at which point are they useful? At which points are they not?

This way, the issue of reading the mind, which starts out simply as a question of "How do I get the mind to settle down?" turns into the activity of discernment. At first, you're peeling away blatant defilements. Then, as you're reading the mind, you're beginning to peel away more and more refined ones. You'll find that the big issue is usually around feeling and perception, and the way you talk to yourself about these things. The breath is a good anchor for keeping you in the present moment so that these conversations about perceptions don't point you away to the past or to the future. It's in this way that all these forms of fabrications—bodily, verbal, and mental—play a role in learning how to read the mind.

Which is why the Buddha's breath instructions cover all three kinds. He talks explicitly about bodily fabrication, to alert you to the fact that you're looking at the breath not simply as breath but also in terms of its impact on how you sense the body. He also talks explicitly about mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions and how they shape the mind. Then the instructions themselves, when you tell yourself, "I'll breathe in sensitive to rapture, breathe in sensitive to pleasure," whatever: Those are verbal fabrications. They're all right there. And they're all useful in every stage of getting the mind to settle down, getting it to understand itself.

So, read your mind. Learn how to decipher the code in which its messages are written. And you'll find that you understand it all the way through.