

The Mind Comes First

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One of the basic principles of the Dhamma is that the mind comes first—in two senses of the term. One is that the state of your mind is the most important thing in your life. It has to come first in all your considerations. When you think about what you're going to accomplish in life, the greatest accomplishment is, as the Buddha said, to have victory over your mind: in other words, victory over the defilements, because victory here means that you come out with true happiness.

The pleasures, the types of happiness offered by the world, are not really satisfying. You work and work and work and try to get them as you go through life. Then they leave you, or you leave them. And, as one of the Dhamma summaries says, the world offers no shelter. No matter how much you can set things up to be just so, just right, they can't guarantee anything. They can disintegrate very easily. You've got to look to the mind inside for any foundation, any solidity, any certainty in life. So as you choose what to do with your life, you always want to think about, "What does this do for the mind?"

You can think about the different perfections that the Buddha talks about. He didn't give the list of the perfections himself, but the list is drawn from his teachings: generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance, truthfulness, determination, goodwill, equanimity. Try to develop these qualities as you go through life because you *can* take them with you. And they'll provide a good place to go. They do offer some shelter. When you can't depend on the world, you have to learn how to depend on the mind. So you've got to make the mind dependable. This is one of the reasons why we meditate: to train the mind in its powers of mindfulness, alertness, ardency, to learn to keep something in mind, hold it in mind, things that are important to know because you can apply them all the time.

Sometimes you hear that each moment should be approached as something new without any anticipations at all. But the Buddha saw that every moment has a certain structure, a structure that all moments have in common. This is the second way in which the mind comes in first. Even before you pick up on sensory input outside, the mind has certain urges going on already. We tend not to notice them, but the Buddha's calling our attention to them. He says that the mind is the forerunner of all things. Everything you experience comes from the fact that the mind is already moving out to see, hear, smell, taste, touch, think about things. In other words, what you bring to experience is going to have a huge impact on how

that experience is shaped and what you're going to experience as a result. So you want to train the mind in ways of thinking and paying attention, developing intentions that will lead to happiness. In other words, you train the mind in the skills that you'll keep on bringing to experience. We meditate to train ourselves in these skills.

Part of the meditation lies in developing right view, and a large part of right view is just that point: You want to look at what you're bringing to the experience. You want to be very clear about that, because it'll make the difference between suffering from the experience or not. Experience is also composed of things coming in from your past actions, and you don't have much control over which past actions are going to ripen at any one time. The image is of seeds in a field. Every time you have an intentional action, you plant a seed. The seed gets watered, and it'll sprout at some point. If the seed is sweet—the Buddha's example is of a grape—you get grapes. If it's bitter, you get bitter melon. But if you're a good cook, you can make good food even out of bitter melon.

So we're learning the skills we need to bring to our experience, and we start with the breath. This is one of the fabrications, as the Buddha calls it: one of the intentional elements we bring to experience. Try to get really sensitive to how you breathe. Most of our lives, we're interested in other things. The breath gets pushed into the background. It goes on automatic pilot. As a result, we don't get as much out of it as we could. So now as we meditate, we're learning to be more sensitive to this dimension of our experience. The more you get sensitive to the breathing and its impact on the body, the more you see that it's going to have an impact on the mind. You can adjust the breath, work the breath energies in the body so that they have a good impact. At the same time, you're priming yourself to be alert, at the very least, to what you're bringing with the body, because the body is where emotions get lodged.

A thought comes through the mind, and it's not just a thought. It goes deep. It digs into something in the mind, hits a nerve, and your breath changes. Say anger comes: It's going to hit the way you breathe. Then the way you breathe is going to have an impact on the hormones in the body and the way you feel the body. Sometimes you get to the point where you can't stand the sensation of how the body feels while you're angry. You've just got to get it out of your system. For most of us, the way we get it out of the system is unskillful. We start saying things and doing things that we later regret, or if we don't regret them, sometimes we go into denial about the harm we've done—neither of which is very good. So it's good to learn an alternative skill for getting things out of your system in a harmless way.

You breathe through the tension, breathe through the distorted breath, iron things out, smooth things out so that, at the very least, the body doesn't get hijacked by the anger.

Then you look at the way you talk to yourself, what the Buddha calls directed thought and evaluation. Here again, when you're meditating, you want to be very clear about what you're saying to yourself now, because it's going to make the difference between whether you're here or not.

The breath is always here. But your mind can focus in and out as if it has different focal lengths. It can be focused right here at the present moment, and very quickly get focused years away, miles away. It all has to do with what you're talking to yourself about. A sensation comes in the body, and something in the mind says, "Oh, this is a thought about x ." And then it runs with it. Well, change what you say. Just say, "This is a sensation in the body, and it could turn into thought. But I don't want it to turn into thought. I want to stay right here with the breath." Then see what other voices come up in the mind that get frustrated, that say, "Hey, I want to think about this. I want to think about that." You say, "Nope, not right now."

You begin to see there's a lot of dialogue going on in the mind. So you want to bring the voice of knowledge, the voice of awareness—particularly awareness of the tricks that your greed, aversion, and delusion can play on you—to the discussion. As you're focused on the breath, talking to yourself about the breath, your knowledge about these things will then get lodged in the breath. That will become your reminder. When unskillful thoughts come up, you can remind yourself, "Okay, one of the ways of undercutting them is to turn around, look at the breath again." Drop whatever that frame of reference was, and re-establish yourself from the frame of reference here at the breath.

Then there are the images you hold in mind. Those sometimes lie behind the dialogue. What pictures do you hold in mind as you approach an experience? Do you anticipate certain things are going to happen? There'll be an image in the mind. What is that image? Is it going to be useful? Say you're going to be approaching someone you know is difficult, and the only image you have in mind is, "I can't do this. I can't do this. Help. Help. Help." You're going to lose it.

You have to hold in mind the image that "I'm capable. I've handled situations like this before." You come with a lot more confidence and you're less likely to pale at the first difficulty, because one of the things you want to learn here as you meditate is that you *are* capable. This is something you can do. You have a skill under your belt and you can bring it out when you need it. When you're talking

with difficult people, stay with the breath and, at the very least, make sure the breath is comfortable. That allows you to handle the situation a lot more easily.

This way, you come to every situation well grounded and you know what you're bringing. One of the things that make life so uncertain is that we come to situations not really fully cognizant of what we're bringing to the situation. Our focus is someplace else.

But if you know you're bringing skills with the breath—skills in how you talk to yourself, skills in how you picture things to yourself, what feelings you're going to focus on—you can come with a lot more confidence. This has to do with situations not only outside, but also within the mind as well.

Greed, aversion, and delusion can come up at any time, and they have their tricks. Well, you've got your skills. You can, at the very least, establish a handle on the situation in the present moment so that you don't get blown away by an unskillful thought. You may not be able to drive it out of the mind, but you don't have to submit to its power. Once you see that you can do that, then you realize that what you bring to the situation is probably the most important set of skills you can learn.

This is precisely what the meditation is for. It trains you on that level of what you're bringing prior to the sensory contact. Right now, as you're sitting here, there's not much outside sensory contact going on: just the pressure of your body on the floor, or on a chair, the sound of the crickets in the background, the temperature of the air. You're freed to see the mind as it deals with something very simple, like how you stay with the breath. You learn how to do this in a way such that when things are not going well, you don't get frustrated. You just keep coming back, coming back. This way, you get to know the mind a lot better.

As the Buddha said, when you deal with breath meditation, you're going to learn about the directed thought and evaluation—what they call verbal fabrication—and perceptions and feelings: what they call mental fabrication. All these things are going to appear right here. As you get to know them, you realize that you're engaged in these activities all the time. Then as you go through the world, you're bringing knowledge with you—knowledge that enables you to keep the mind first, in both senses of the word. In other words, one, you don't forget the fact that what you're bringing to the situation in the mind is the important element. That's under your power. That's a skill you can work on. And two, you're doing this for the sake of the well-being of the mind above all else.

So always remember: The mind comes first. It means two things, but the two go together. When you can remember that, you're safe wherever you go.