

The Joy of Curiosity

January 3, 2023

Years back, a psychologist who was studying infant behavior noted that infants tend to be happiest when they've learned that they can do something about their environment, and they can predict the results of what they've done so that they can do it again. It can be something very simple, like making a noise or moving something around. This is one of the reasons why when an infant learns how to make a noise, it'll repeat it over and over and over again. It's not only that you can have an influence on your environment, but you can anticipate what that influence is going to do: That's the pleasure.

Then as we get older, of course, we get more discerning in what kind of influence we want to have and we can figure out more and more complex things, but there's a joy in all of that. When you think about the different ways the Buddha talks about self—self as a consumer, self as a producer, and self as a commentator—this is where they all come together. The producer does something, the commentator sees that you can predict the results, figures it out, and the consumer finds it pleasant. There's joy there. As we get more and more discerning in what we accept as an action that produces joy, that's how we grow up.

When we meditate, we simply carry that process further on. This is why it's important to realize that we are responsible for doing what we're doing here as we meditate, and we're trying to figure things out. It's not the case that we give up on our agency. We actually continue to find joy in agency, but we find more and more mature forms of joy by figuring out our own mind.

This is one of the reasons why meditation can be so frustrating, though, because the mind is very complex. We follow the instructions one day and they seem to work. The mind settles down. Then you do what you think is exactly the same thing the next day, and your mind is all over the place. Which means that there's a lot still to figure out. The first steps are basically just trying to figure out how to get the mind to settle down. How can we get it quiet and how can we get it to stay with one thing? The commentator has to do some directed thought and evaluation to figure things out. If the mind is not settling down, why? Is it the breath? Is it the mind? Is it something you've carried in from earlier in the day, a mood, a memory of an incident that hurt you? How can you think your way past that if it's a problem that the mind is carrying in?

You've got to do some mental work. Remind yourself why there's no good reason to bring those moods in. Just because the mood happened during the course of the day doesn't mean you need it to continue.

Here you can bring in the breath. Breathe in a way that dissolves whatever tension there may be in the body that's related to that incident or related to that mood. Try to get as interested as you can in the breath. Try to figure it out. When you breathe in, where does the breath energy feel like it's coming in? Does it feel like it's coming in or does it feel like it's radiating out from within the body? Look for that.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha lists directed thought and evaluation as among the first necessary steps in getting the mind to settle down. It's the insight part of your concentration practice, because you begin to realize that how you put things together right now depends both on the raw materials you have to work with coming in from your past karma—and past karma here can be anything from earlier in this lifetime or habits you picked up from previous lifetimes, all the way up to things you did just a few minutes ago—and then your skill in dealing with the different problems that your past karma can churn out.

That's one of the reasons why you have to keep practicing again and again and again, because past karma's a mixed bag. Different karmic seeds ripen at different rates. There may be something waiting for tomorrow. It's still in your mind. It's not showing itself yet, which is one of the reasons why doing the same thing today and doing the same thing tomorrow will not necessarily get the same results. It's like the difference between fixing a salad with store-bought tomatoes as opposed to tomatoes you've grown for yourself. The raw materials are different. You have to be able to sense that and learn how to deal with it, which means that your commentator, the one that's trying to figure things out and decide what needs to be done, needs the energy to figure things out.

This, of course, sometimes runs into a problem. You need the energy to figure things out, but you can't access that energy because the mind is tired. It's a problem in the abstract, but you find, as things settle down, that the concentration and the figuring out can help each other along. When you've figured out how you can do that, then there's a lot more joy in the agency of getting the mind settled down.

Of course, once it's settled down, there's a part of the mind that's going to complain that it's bored. Our normal reaction is to appease that voice, to look for something else, think about something else. In meditation circles, this is where vipassana romances happen. You start fantasizing about other people around you—or you can fantasize about all kinds of things. You have to realize that the boredom is the problem. You've got to understand that it's something you've got to figure out. Remember, the joy in meditation doesn't come just from having a pleasant breath experience, because if it did, you could sit here breathing comfortably and there would be no problem at all, but the mind likes to figure things out. And if it's very still and nothing seems to be happening, it's going to look for something.

So try to figure out that attitude of boredom. What is the mind telling itself? And who's telling whom in here? There's a lot going on in the present moment even when

the mind is still. Your ability to realize that fact, look into it, understand it: That's one of the ways in which the concentration gets deeper.

You come to a point where the directed thought and evaluation are no longer necessary because the mind is firmly with the breath. Then you've got to figure out, "How do I just stay with the sensation of the breath so that the sense of the breath and the awareness in the body all seem to become one?" And when you've got that, how do you maintain it? That's one thing you can try to figure out.

Another thing, of course, is how to figure out your distractions. Why does the mind like to go for boredom? We don't think of it as a choice. It seems to be a simple unavoidable fact, but it's a decision you make. The way to counteract that decision is to remind yourself that there are a lot of subtle things going on, and if you really want to see them, you've got to get the mind really, really quiet and on top of things.

Learn how to ask questions about this conversation in the committee of the mind because you find that there's not just one commentator in there, not just one producer or one consumer. There are lots of them. You're training the ones that try to master the issues of concentration, the issues of the meditation, and - to get past your defilements. All the other commentators in the mind have other agendas, and you have to learn how to tame them, get them on your side. You can do that because they're all trying to figure out how to predict what's going to give rise to happiness, so keep reminding them that the genuine article is will have to be found inside and not through your fantasies. It's found by watching the processes of the mind as they happen right here, right now.

It's like the difference between watching a play from out in the audience and then watching the production from backstage, seeing all the lighting technicians running around and the actors as they get ready to go on stage. Instead of being in world of what's supposed to be happening in the play, you're looking at the mechanics—and it can be fascinating.

In the same way, the mechanics of the mind are really interesting. Here you are, shaping your experience, and you're trying to do it in such a way that gives rise to happiness, yet all too often happiness turns to something else. We think something will give good results and it doesn't, or you thought that certain results were okay, acceptable, but you realize that if you keep putting up with that level of what's acceptable, you're going to keep on suffering. So, you have to raise the standards for all three functions—the commentator, the consumer, the producer—by watching them in the practice and figuring them out.

There's really no reason to be bored as you're here. There's a lot going on, just that we've taught ourselves to ignore it so that we can carry on with whatever other conversations we'd like to get interested in. So, realize that there's a lot to see here. There's a lot to figure out, and you really do want to *try* to figure it out.

I don't understand those instructions you hear sometimes that say, "Don't try to figure anything out, just be with whatever." There's no joy in that. There's no joy in just

accepting whatever. The Buddha wasn't the sort of person who didn't try to figure things out. Look at all the teachings he left behind, analyzing the different ways the mind can settle down, analyzing the different ways the mind can create problems, all those lists of qualities. Those teachings weren't the product of a mind that didn't want to figure things out.

And once he'd figured things out, he didn't just say, "Well, just accept whatever I've given you." *You've* got to figure them out, too, because you're not here just to figure out the lists of words in the books. You've got to figure out your own mind because the mind is the problem that's getting in the way of true happiness, even though it wants true happiness. But it can master the skills that lead there. That's an important problem to figure out, and it's important that you learn how to take joy in the process of figuring things out.

There's a word in Thai, *songsai*, that means both to doubt and to wonder. In some cases, the doubt is a hindrance if you doubt that you can do this, doubt that it's worth it. But if you start wondering what's going on—"Why can't I find the happiness I really want?"—that's the doubt of curiosity. And there's a joy in figuring things out, and in the curiosity is what motivates that.

So, learn to be curious about your own mind. If you're not curious about your own mind, what can you be curious about? There's a lot to be figured out here, and there's a lot of joy in the process of figuring things out, and even greater joy when you figure out what the mind is doing that's getting in the way of the deathless, the happiness that really does satisfy.

In this way, that little infant in all of us that finds joy in figuring things out grows up into a mature meditator—not by abandoning that joy in figuring things out, but learning how to pursue it skillfully.