

Knowing & Acting

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The mind functions in two ways: It acts and it knows. Its acting starts out with a thinking. Then it gets the body to act in line with its thoughts. But it's also aware of what's going on. It's because of the combination of these two things that we know anything at all, that we can understand anything at all. If we were just aware and sensitive but weren't able to act, the world would wash over us and we wouldn't understand a thing. Or if we were just acting without being aware, it'd be like wind blowing through trees. The wind doesn't know anything. It just does its thing. But the mind has a special quality of being both an actor and a knower.

The problem is that in its actions, it creates a lot of suffering for itself. If we don't really know, we can act in ways that cause a lot of suffering not only for ourselves but also for other people. So this is what we have to work on. We have to be aware of what we're doing so that we can stop causing so much suffering.

That's where the meditation comes in, to train us to be more alert to what we're doing. Normally, out in the world, when are we most alert to what we're doing? When we're working at a skill. You pay very close attention to what you're doing, you look at the results, and then you adjust what you're doing to get better results. The same principle holds in the meditation. You've got to work at it as a skill. If you just do the steps without paying much attention to what's going on and simply hope for good results to come, that won't work. You have to be alert to what you're doing, alert to what's happening as a result of what you're doing, and then make adjustments to what you do as a result.

In other words, you have to develop attention and intention at the same time. Pay attention to what you're doing, and what you're doing here is working on an intention. The intention here is to get the mind to settle down. Approach it as a skill. Of course, in the beginning as with any skill, it's like following a recipe. You follow what's in the book and you do what you're told to do several times until you begin to get more of an intuitive feel for what you're doing. This is where your alertness and your understanding of what you're doing begin to kick in. That's when it becomes *your* meditation. You're not just learning about Buddhism. You're using the process of meditation to learn about yourself, so that you can see in what ways that your thoughts and deeds are not skillful—where you create suffering for yourself, create suffering for others—and then you can make a change. That's because you're not just blindly acting. You're acting with alertness.

The skill here, what we're working on at the moment, is getting the mind concentrated, getting it absorbed in the breath. The word for absorption in Pali is *jhāna*, which is related to a verb, *jhayati*, which means to burn, as when a fire burns. They have several different words for burning in Pali, and it's interesting that the one they choose for *jhāna* is the steady burning of an oil lamp. *Jhāyati* means to burn steadily: The flame doesn't flicker; it doesn't move around a lot. It gives a very steady light, a light you can read by. That's the kind of quality that you want to develop.

So find one spot in the body where you know the breath is coming in, you know it's going out, and it feels good. Protect that spot in the same way that you'd want to protect a flame from the wind so that it doesn't go out, doesn't waver. The Thai word Ajaan Fuang used was *prakhong*. It's a very gentle kind of protection, as when you hold a baby chick in your hands. You don't squeeze it so tightly that it dies, but at the same time you don't hold it so loosely that it can fly away. Protect it just enough so that it stays where you want it.

If the breath doesn't feel comfortable at that spot, very gently adjust it until it does. When you finally get a feeling tone that feels good right there, notice what other spots in the body have the same feeling tone. Think of them connecting. It's as if you're starting a fire in a wind. At the very beginning, you have to protect that little tiny, tiny flame until the fuel catches fire. With the breath meditation, realize that the whole body is breathing and you can have that same feeling tone throughout the body. Just let it spread—and then let it stay there.

It's a balancing act, where you don't put too much pressure on it and you don't get too loose. You've got to pay very close attention to what you're doing. This is how discernment arises from the practice of *jhāna*. You're paying very close attention to what you're doing, you begin to see slight movements in the mind, slight movements in the body, that you wouldn't have noticed otherwise. Without this point of comparison, things could move and you'd hardly know whether they were moving or not, how fast, in what way.

It's like lying on your back on a field and looking up at the clouds in the sky. If you don't have a reference point on the ground, you begin to lose track after a while: Which direction are those clouds going? Are they moving at all or is it just a figment of your imagination? But if you've got as a point of reference something like a telephone pole or the gable of a house, something you know is standing still, then you can make comparisons. And the same with the mind: You want to develop this quality of stillness and steadiness so that when things do move, you notice it. And you notice the quality of the action as they move, whether it's

skillful or not, what comes from it. Because insight basically means seeing cause and effect.

All too often we see causes without effects, or effects without causes. In other words, we see what we do but we're not too clear on what the results are. We very definitely get results in terms of pleasure or pain, but we're not quite sure what happened, how we did it. When the mind is in that mode, it doesn't really gain any insight at all. But when it sees the connection—"Oh, you do this and this results. When you do that, that results": That's insight. It gives you a stronger, stronger sense of what you're doing, whether it's skillful or not, whether it's causing suffering or not. The mind inclines to find ways of acting that cause less and less suffering, that are more and more skillful. But before you can see these things, this steadiness has to be really steady. You have to protect it, you have to look after it, treat it with respect.

In one of the verses we chant in the morning and evening chanting, the Verses of Respect, there's one line: *Samādhi-garu ātāpī*, "One who is ardent with respect for concentration." You've got to respect this quiet quality of the mind, to have a strong sense of its importance, even though in the beginning it may not seem like much, just this tiny little flame that you're trying to keep going. Whoops, there it goes. It's blown out. Well, you light it again. You try to keep it going. Whoops, there it goes again, it blows out. You start wondering if anything is ever going to come of it. But after a while, you find that you can keep at least a little flame going. Then when it begins to connect up through the body, you get a strong sense that it really feels good. And the mind has a sense of, "Well, at last." It's coming back home to a place where it's probably been before but didn't know how it got there. But now it's beginning to realize you can get there as a skill. There's a certain rightness to it.

Once you develop the skill, it becomes kind of ordinary after a while. That's because you've got it but you're not putting it to the proper use. You don't see what powers it can have in making a change in the mind.

But sometimes you can't push it. Sometimes you have to just sit there and wait. It's like being a hunter. The hunter goes out in the forest but he can't determine that "The rabbits are going to come before 10 or 2 or whatever time, and then we'll go home." It doesn't work that way at all. You have to go out and just sit there and wait and watch. There has to be the quality of stillness but alertness at the same time, to see what's going to come up and not to scare anything away. Sometimes nothing comes up, but you can't abandon that quality of alertness because if you do, that might be just the moment when something interesting went past in the mind.

So learn how to treat your powers of concentration with respect, because they make all the difference between understanding the mind and not, between being able to gain release from your stress and suffering or just staying where you've been all along.

The Buddha said that right concentration forms the center of the path. There are eight factors all together in the noble path, but right concentration forms the heart. All the other seven factors, he said, are requisites to help look after concentration to give it the right balance, give it the right tone, give it the right level of alertness. The concentration, though, is what forms the core. So as you're working here, trying to center your mind on the breath, remind yourself: This is the core of the path that you're working on. It's a noble truth when you get it going right. So it's worth your full attention.