

The Good We Already Have

September 2001

It's a basic theme in the Buddha's teachings that we want to develop the good things that are already there. We all come with good potentials, we all have some forms of skillful mental states. The problem is that they're not usually given that much a chance to develop because we move back and forth: sometimes the mind thinks in skillful ways, sometimes it gets overcome by greed, anger, and delusion, and goes off in unskillful ways. Back and forth like this, and nothing really positive has much of a chance to grow.

And so we meditate – the Pali word is *bhavana*, which means to develop, to increase. That's what we're doing: We're increasing the good things that are already there. Like the breath. Ordinarily, the breath comes in and goes out, and there's not that much to it. But if you focus your attention on it steadily as you tune into the breath, you find that the sense of ease grows greater and greater and greater.

It's like the sun shining on a seed. If the seed is left in the dark, it won't sprout. But as the sun shines on it, things come out. It sprouts leaves, roots, turns into a plant. But if the sun shines on it just a little bit, it'll start to grow – and then if it's dark again, it'll stop. So we want to shine on it constantly and give it a chance to grow constantly. Like the vegetables up in Alaska during the summer: They have all those hours of sunlight, so they grow at amazing rates. You want to shine your mindfulness, shine your alertness onto the breath, and there's not much else you have to do. It's like the sun shining on the plants. The sun doesn't have to reach down and arrange the plants. Simply by shining on them, it gets the plants to respond.

And so it is with the breath. If you maintain steady awareness, steady mindfulness with the breath, all the rough spots in the breath will start ironing out. It will seem more and more natural to breathe in a way that feels comfortable coming in, going out. That way, you take a quality already there and make the most of it, simply by your continued attention.

Other good qualities both in body and mind can develop in the same way—just by focusing your attention on them, giving them the right chance to grow and whatever other things they need for their nourishment.

You tune in to all kinds of good things. There are many different levels, for instance, of the breath energy in the body. They're all there, all the time, it's just that they're not developed. If you tune in to them, you give them a chance to develop and grow, until ultimately the breath energy fills the body and there's no need to breathe in and breathe out. A very steady sense of stillness develops. And as the breath gets steady and still this way, the mind begins to take after the breath. It gets in touch with its levels of steadiness and stillness as well.

Because there already are parts of the mind that are totally unaffected by anything. It's just that they get covered up by all the other things going on in the mind. But as we stay with the

breath that goes more and more steady, more and more still, the opportunity for the part of the mind that's steady and still comes so show itself. And as you stay with it for a long time, as you tune in to it for longer and longer periods of time, it takes charge more and more within your awareness. As you get more and more skilled, you find that it's there at all times. You can tune in to it at any time.

The sense of space that surrounds the body, all the various topics that you can take as topics of meditation: They're there already, it's just that they're there in an undeveloped state. If you tune in to them and learn how to *keep* the mind tuned, you've developed one of the most useful skills in concentration. Once you get a particular state going, you learn how not to do so much that you destroy it, or how not to get too lazy so that it all falls apart. You have to invest a level of consistent energy that's just right. This is the persistence that makes the difference.

It's like walking a tightrope. Sometimes you lean too far to the right and fall off; lean too far to the left and fall off. But after a while, you get so that you can stay on, keep your balance for longer and longer and longer periods of time until it becomes instinctual. You get a more and more instinctive sense of how to maintain that balance.

So this is what the practice is: practice in sharpening our tools for tuning the mind in and letting it stay there. Once you learn how to do this with the breath, then you find you can do this with other topics as well. And this talent you have of tuning the mind in becomes a very important skill, because it allows you to realize that your awareness has many levels. And you have the choice where you're going to tune in. Oftentimes, we tune in to things that are actively harmful to ourselves and other people—and we seem to have an awful lot of skill in doing that. Greed, anger and delusion are things that are very easy to keep track of. You keep adding fuel to them, adding nourishment to them, so that they grow and grow and grow. But it requires more skill to focus on things that are actually beneficial for the mind. But if you develop that skill, you have the choice.

As long as the mind has to depend on what they call a support, an *arammana*, try to choose a good support for the mind, like the topics of concentration. After a while, you realize that they're there not only when you're sitting here with your eyes closed. They're there all the time. An important part of the skill is learning how to tune in to them whenever you need them, so that when things outside or things in the body are in a turmoil, there's still a certain level of awareness you can tune in to, so that, at the very least, you're not caught up in that turmoil. And as your skills get sharper and sharper, you can begin to cut through the turmoil and see exactly where it comes from, what allows it to happen, and what you can let go of that can stop it.

So this ability to tune in and stay tuned is an important part of the meditation. In other words, you stop channel-surfing. You put down the remote control and you just stay tuned to this one thing, the breath. When the breath takes you as far as it can go, then you stay tuned in to a sense of space. That takes you as far as it can go and you stay tuned to the sense of infinite

consciousness: a sense of “knowing” that has no discernable limits. It’s all there. What makes the difference is simply your ability to stay tuned in the right way that will nourish these useful qualities. In other words, they’re always there, but the question of being able to tune in to them when you need them – that’s what you’ve got to work on.

So try to focus in. If your first approach doesn’t work, make adjustments. Be able to monitor yourself, because that’s how people develop a sense of balance. We see people walking on a tightrope, and it’s not that they stay perfectly straight in line all the time. Sometimes they lean to the right, sometimes to the left. It’s just that they’re very good at correcting any imbalance. Whatever’s needed to stay on the tightrope, they can do that. Those are the talents you’ve got to develop as a meditator, to learn how to correct for any imbalance.

This is what the Buddha was talking about when he said that attention and intention influence each other. In our terms, they have a feedback loop. You pay attention to what’s going on. If things seem a little bit out of balance, remember that your intention is to maintain your balance. And so you do what you can to develop that skill. So not only is there feedback, but you can monitor the feedback and steer it in a direction you want it to go. That’s what’s required for any skill. It’s not a mechanical process. It’s more organic. You’re in charge. You steer the way.

It’s like steering a sailboat. In the beginning, you sense that the boat’s tipping over to one side, and so you turn the rudder too far and the boat capsizes to the other side. But after a while, you begin to get a more instinctive sense of how much pressure you have to put on the rudder to keep the boat on an even keel. That comes from feedback. It comes from practice, trial and error, again and again and again, so that your sense of coordination gets more and more instinctive.

That’s what we’re doing: We’re trying to maintain our balance on the breath, so that the pressure of the mind isn’t too great, it’s not little, it’s just right to keep that sense of comfortable breath going. Allow it to spread and nourish the whole body so that you become more sensitive to more refined breath sensations. It all develops from these basic qualities of mindfulness and alertness: paying attention to what’s going on, paying attention to what you’re doing, and making adjustments so that you can keep the mind fine-tuned.

This is the skill that you work on as you’re sitting here with your eyes closed and it’s something you should also work on at other times of the day, throughout the day. The basic survival of the mind depends on this. It’s not that the issues you have to deal with in the mind come up only while you’re here with your eyes closed. They’re out there all over the place. So you want to be able to take these skills that you’ve mastered here and apply them all the time. At the end of the meditation, you don’t say, “Okay, the meditation period is over, it’s time to stop.” That doesn’t help anything at all. You’re getting practice with the tools you need for real life problems, real life things that are going to knock you off balance if you’re not careful.

But just remember, the good things there in the mind are always there. The potential for them is always there. It's just a question of learning how to locate them and keep tuned in to them. That's what makes all the difference.