

Unskillful Thinking

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The practice of concentration often goes best when you treat it as a game, something you do for enjoyment. After all, some of the factors of right concentration include pleasure and rapture, and these things don't arise if you treat the concentration as a chore, as something grim you have to slog your way through.

So make it a pleasant challenge. How long can you stay with the breath? If thoughts come in, can you shoot them down in the same way you'd shoot down enemy aircraft in a video game? In other words, when a thought comes in, don't be too quick to get into the thought. See it as an event, as something that comes and goes, and if you get inside it, you've been trapped. You want to stay outside the thought. So whatever thoughts comes up—good thoughts, bad thoughts, thoughts about the past, thoughts about the future—just shoot them down. In other words, you know they're there, but you don't have to get involved. And if you don't get involved, they go away.

This is an important lesson in training the mind, seeing that you can choose whether to get involved with your thoughts. You don't have to follow them around wherever they go. Because a lot of your thoughts are just random firings of nerves in your brain. You try to make sense out of them, you try to make a sense of who you are out by interpreting those thoughts, and it's pretty liberating to realize that you don't have to do that. You can stand apart from the thoughts. Use the breath as your foundation, stay with the breath coming in, stay with the breath going out. Try to be as alert as possible. Again, it's like playing a game. If you're not alert, you get shot down. Try to keep your awareness all around. The whole body breathes in; the whole body breathes out. And sometimes thoughts sneak up on you from behind, so watch out for those.

As you keep at this, you gain a sense of the pleasure that comes from having mastered a skill. In the beginning, the thoughts will come in and they'll drag you away before you realize what's happened. You give into them because you don't really realize that you have the choice to go with them or not. You don't notice the moment when you make that choice. But if you stay with the breath and make your goal for the hour to watch to see exactly when it is that you go along with the thought, you begin to clearly see that there really is a choice. This in and of itself is a really good skill to master because a lot of thoughts can get you depressed, they can get you angry, they really get in the way of any clarity in your mind. If you

realize that you have the choice to go with them or not as you like, you're in a position of freedom. You're over them rather than their being over you.

So treat this as a game. See if you can sidestep from the thoughts, escape from the thoughts, by staying with the breath.

At the same time, you learn about the breathing. If you're going to think about anything, think about the breath. Ask yourself: Is this breath comfortable? What's the difference between a comfortable breath and an uncomfortable breath? You can experiment breathing in different ways, and after a while you'll see that right now the body likes this kind of breathing. It doesn't like that kind of breathing.

So, look for yourself. Learn to use your own powers of observation. This is another way in which the practice is liberating. This is an area where you're in charge, where you're the expert. You know when the breath is coming in, you know it's going out, you know when it's comfortable, whether you like it—you also know when you don't like it. And you're also in a position where, if you don't like it, you can change it. Nobody's forcing you to breathe in an uncomfortable way.

This means that wherever you are, you don't have to be bored. You've always got something to look into: How is the breath energy going in the body? They say that the breath energy can be felt all the way down to the toes. Can you feel it? So when you're sitting around doing nothing, you don't have to do nothing, you can watch your breath, you can play with the breath, you can learn about the breath. At the same time, you can play with sidestepping your thoughts.

In this way, you can enjoy the present moment and develop important skills at the same time. Because as you grow older you find that your biggest enemy is often your own mind. All kinds of weird thoughts can come in, making you misunderstand things. When you misunderstand them, the things that shouldn't make you upset get you upset. Things that shouldn't make you suffer make you suffer. Yet it's not really that they're making you suffer: You're making yourself suffer over them. That's the problem.

As the Buddha pointed out, there are two kinds of suffering in the world. There's the natural suffering of having a body, of having a mind that's full of change. Then there's unnatural suffering, which is the suffering that comes from craving, wanting things to be the way they can't be at all. The second one is not only unnatural but also unnecessary. And it's important that we learn how to distinguish between these two kind of suffering and stress. After all, stress in the body is natural. There's always going to be stress; there's always going to be pain. And if you think about it carefully, you realize there's always going to be illness of

one kind or another in the body. The body never functions perfectly. When you're born, you're born with the need for all kinds of things.

That's why we have that chant on the four requisites: food, clothing, shelter, medicine. These are things the body lacks. As the Buddha once said, the greatest disease is hunger, and it's there every day, every day, every day. Then we develop other diseases on top of that. The diseases in the body are normal. We have a chant that says aging is normal, illness is normal, death is normal, these are the normal things that happen to bodies. And when you latch onto a body and claim it as yours, and don't want it to get old, or sick, or dead, you're going to suffer.

So the problem is not so much with the body, it's with the mind's attitudes. This is what we've got to work on.

Often we miss the illness in the body because we are distracted by other things. I was reading a while back on a book on the Zen monks Korea, and the monks there seem to be really obsessed with their health. And the same is often true with the monks in Thailand. They've got a lot of time to sit there and look at their present moment. What do you see in the present moment? Well, there's a pain here, there's a discomfort there, a lack of energy here, frenetic energy there.

If you're distracted by other things, you don't see them. But if you're sitting there in the present moment with nothing else to look at, there it is, staring you right in the face. The body is a nest of disease. It's always going to be that way, always has been that way. And if it's a disease you can cure, you cure it; you don't just sit around and let it happen. But you find that there are a lot of things you just can't change about the body.

So you have the choice: Do you want to identify with it or not? If you let the mind be ill, the mind is going to go around latching onto other things to identify with, and then it gets itself even worse off. This is why we're working on the health of the mind. If you can learn how not to fall prey to your thoughts, you find the mind doesn't grow ill at all.

The illnesses of the mind are like the illnesses of the body in that they come from two things: one, germs from the outside; and, two, a lack of resistance from the inside. In other words, sometimes ideas come in from outside and they just get lodged in our minds. Or sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations come from the outside, get lodged in our minds, and start to fester. And, as with the body, if your powers of resistance are up, these things don't fester, they don't cause any disease.

The diseases here, of course, are greed, anger, and delusion; or passion, aversion, and delusion. If you learn how to develop your mindfulness, alertness, and discernment, you build up your resistance, so that when a sight comes into

the eyes, you can see it for what it is. It's just a very ephemeral kind of thing. It's there for just an instant and then it's gone, and then it's replaced by another one, and another one. And yet some people devote their whole lives to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations—these things that keep slipping out of their grasp like water going through their fingers.

If you haven't built up your powers of alertness, you're sure to fall for these things. They're sure to spark greed, anger, and delusion in the mind. But if you learn to be really mindful, you can see the whole process of sensory perception: how sights come in, what the mind does with the sights, how sounds are sensed, and what the mind does with the sounds. You begin to see what an artificial process the whole thing is. And you realize you wouldn't want to build the happiness of your life on things that are so fleeting. This is how you build up your resistance.

The same goes with ideas. We pick up a lot of ideas from outside, and then we concoct our own from the inside. If we're not careful to check them, they can get lodged deep in our minds and start to fester, bubbling up with weirder ideas that lead us to misunderstand things. But if you notice these thoughts as they arise, and instead of latching onto every thought that comes into your mind as being your idea, you can ask yourself: "Do you really believe this? Is this really worthwhile to you? If you followed the thought, where would it take you?" Some things are true, but they're not worth thinking about.

This is one of the Buddha's most important insights. He said when he was speaking, he would speak only things that were true and useful. And he would find the right time to say things, because some true and useful things are pleasing and others are displeasing. So he would find the right time to say pleasing things and the right time to say displeasing things. If something was true but wasn't of any real benefit, he wouldn't talk about it at all. Well, you should take the same attitude toward your thinking. If something is true but has no real benefit to you, then why think about it? You also try to find a sense of time and place for your thinking. Some thoughts are useful at some times, and at other times they're not. So learn how to examine your thinking in this way: What kind of thinking is skillful, true, and beneficial? What kind of thinking is not?

And ask yourself why you're attached to unskillful thinking. It's like a letting an enemy into your house. You've got a traitor inside. Do you really want to hang around with that kind of thinking? Look as much as you can at the drawbacks of that kind of thinking, and it gets easier, and easier, and easier to give up. At the same time, hang around with the good and useful thinking that gives you a sense

of well-being. Because if you don't have that sense of well-being, it's hard to let go of the other things you're addicted to.

When you can look at your thoughts, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas in these ways, you can ask yourself: Are they really useful? They might be true, but they may not be useful. If they're not useful, then why bother? And even if they might be useful in the abstract, are they useful right now? That's the other question.

When you can step back from your thoughts in this way, you're not so totally identified with them. And that tendency you have for picking up germs gets weaker and weaker. You have a stronger and stronger defense against infection in the mind. And when the mind is kept healthy like this, then the issues of what's going on in the body get less and less and less oppressive. There may be pain, but if you're not thinking about it in the wrong way, it's not going to affect the mind. There may be disappointment, but if you learn not to identify with these thoughts, learn not to identify with the diseases, either in the body or the mind, they have no place to latch on. When your powers of resistance are strong like this, you can go anywhere you want.

These are some of the advantages that come from the learning how to train the mind, starting out with this game of concentration to see: Can you stay with the breath for a whole minute? Then, can you do it for a minute? Two minutes? Three? Five? Ten? See if you can do it for a whole hour. And then when you've done it, you find that the mind is a lot more interesting a place to be than it was before. You're in charge. You can protect yourself from all the diseases that come in, and all the germs that would come in through your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and your mind. Of course, there may still be diseases in the body, but as long as there are no diseases in the mind, then the diseases in the body don't matter because the mind is the important part. The mind is what makes all the difference in the world.