

Exercising Discernment

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As we meditate, we're working on a skill. And it's important to reflect on what you need to bring to an activity to turn it into a skill. The Buddha offers a number of ways to reflect on that.

One is his description of the qualities of mind you have to bring to mindfulness practice. As we were saying earlier today, the establishing of mindfulness is a skill, it's an activity. There are three qualities you need to bring to it. One is mindfulness, two is ardency, and three is alertness.

Mindfulness is simply the ability to keep something in mind. If you're meditating on the breath, you keep the breath in mind. If you're meditating on goodwill, you keep goodwill in mind. Just keep remembering that, again and again and again. Every time you breathe in, every time you breathe out, this is where you want to be.

Alertness means checking on what you're actually doing. Are you with the breath or are you not? And when you *are* with the breath, how does it feel? Does it feel comfortable or not? If it's not comfortable, you won't be able to stay.

So you want to work, on the one hand, on the physical side. What kind of breathing would feel good just now? Just think that thought. Ask that question to yourself: "Body, what do you want? Long breathing? Short breathing? Deep? Shallow? Often, when you simply open up that possibility that there are many different ways of breathing, the body will change its rhythm of breathing. You don't have to exert any physical pressure on it. Just open up the possibility. That gets the body out of whatever mechanical feedback loop it's been in.

And be alert to how the sensation of breathing feels. Where does it feel satisfying when you breathe in? Which part of the body feels refreshed by the breath? Can you let other parts of the body feel refreshed by the breath too? Watch.

That's where the ardency comes in. It's not that we're sitting here straining till beads of sweat pop out of our foreheads. Ardency means that you give really close attention to what you're doing. You try to be very, very sensitive to how the breathing feels. The more sensitive you are, the more the body will feel refreshed by the breath.

Another thing you want to be alert to is when the mind slips off. If you notice that it's slipped off, then as soon as you're aware of that, bring it back. That's another function of ardency. And try to be alert for the warning signs that the

mind is about to go again. It'll tell you. If you learn to look for the warning signs, you'll see them. Sometimes there's a bit of boredom. Sometimes the mind says, "Okay, enough of this. What's next?" It's as if it's extending a little pseudopod to find another place to land. Notice that and just let it go. Because it's not a pseudopod. It's just a movement of energy.

So these are the three qualities you want to bring to the meditation: mindfulness, alertness, and ardency.

We also develop the set of qualities that Buddha talks about in connection to developing a skill. As he said, success in the skill starts with desire. Often we think that desire as a bad thing in Buddhism, but actually it has a very positive role in the path. The craving that the Buddha says is the cause of suffering comes down specifically to three types of craving: craving for sensual satisfaction, craving for becoming, and craving for no becoming.

Becoming is the process where our mind builds little worlds inside and then goes into them.

You see that clearly in the meditation as the mind slips off. It's as if that pseudopod is a bubble beginning to form, and then there's a little pinching, and the bubble is independent. It goes floating off someplace else. Then it pops and you're right back here. The craving for that kind of activity is a cause for suffering.

The craving for no becoming means basically that you get a particular state and you don't want it to change. You want to clamp down on everything just as it is. That's a kind of craving too, and it can cause suffering as well.

So those are the cravings the Buddha points out as things to avoid. But the desire for the path is the desire basically for a happiness that doesn't change, a happiness that doesn't turn on you. That's a healthy part of the path. It's a healthy desire to have, a skillful desire to have. Without that, you can't even do right effort. Part of the definition of right effort is that you generate desire to get rid of unskillful qualities and to develop skillful ones. If you don't have that desire, things just don't happen.

So you focus your desire for true happiness, not on something far away on the horizon, but on the step where you are right now, on what's coming up in the mind. If it's skillful, you want to encourage it. If it's not skillful, you want to do what you can to drop it.

That desire is an important element of success in the practice. And it's not a bad thing to think about success. It's not a bad thing to have goals in the path. If you don't have a goal, what are you doing here? There's got to be a purpose to what you're doing, and it's important that you be very clear about that. If you start denying that you have a goal, then your desire goes underground. When it goes

underground, it gets dangerous. It turns into The Thing. It sneaks underground and suddenly it pops someplace else, infecting you with its genetic germs. And then *you* turn into The Thing.

So it's best to be open and aboveboard about it. You have desires. You want happiness. If you deny that, you're really into denial.

So take these things that are subconscious and bring them out into the light of day. Once they're brought out into the light of day, the healthy ones will thrive; the unhealthy ones will shrivel up and die.

So be very clear about what kind of desire you want to encourage, and how important it is to have desire on the path, and that it's focused, as I said, not on something off on horizon, but on the next step, what's right here right now, knowing that as you focus right here, right now, it'll get you step by step to that point on the horizon.

The poor monks here have heard this image many, many times. It's like going to a mountain on the horizon. If you drive your car watching the mountain all the time, you're going to drive into people, drive into trees, drive off the road. Once you've determined that this looks like a road that's going to go to the mountain, you focus your attention on the road. Check every now and then to make sure that the mountain isn't suddenly appearing in your rearview mirror. But otherwise you focus your attention right in front of you, on the road. The road doesn't lead you there, but by following the road, you get there.

So that's desire.

The next quality is persistence, which relates to ardency. In other words, you really stick with the practice, again and again and again. If mindfulness is going to show you anything about the mind, if alertness is going to show you anything about the mind, you have to really stick with it. Otherwise, the really tricky parts of the mind hide themselves behind curtains you don't see. You fall into those gaps that are such a frequent part of the mind's ordinary functioning. As a state of becoming is about to form, there's a moment of unconsciousness. You blank out. If you want to see the forming of these states, you have to fight that moment of unconsciousness, which means that you have to make your alertness and mindfulness as continuous as possible. That's where ardency comes in, in keeping them continuous.

The next quality is intent, which relates to ardency as well: being really totally focused on what you are doing.

The fourth quality is hard to translate into English. The Pali word is *vimansa*. It means a lot of things. One is your ability to analyze what's going on. If the meditation is not working, you've got to look at it and figure out why. Or if it *does*

work, you want to figure it out as well. When it's working, you don't want to bother it too much while you're doing it, but when you come out of concentration, stop and reflect for a while: "What did I do just now? How did I focus the mind? How did I stick with the object? What results did I get?"

There are other times when you want to analyze it right while it's happening, in particular while focusing the mind on breath and it doesn't seem right. Okay, what's wrong? Is it the way you're focusing? Is the way you're breathing? Is there some subterranean issue that's following you around or that you're carrying around? Maybe you should look to that first before focusing on the breath. Maybe there's some unfinished business. Maybe there's something you did or said today that's bothering you.

That's one of the best ways of learning the connection between meditation practice and the precepts. If, during the day, you say something that's not true, you say something that's divisive, or spend your time on a lot of idle chatter, that's going to have an impact on your meditation. If you can see the connection, okay, you've learned something important. That's the quality of analysis.

But *vimamsa* also means your ability to come up with new ideas if things are not working. This is ingenuity. You need ingenuity because not everything is laid out in the texts. As we noted today, when the Buddha talks about different issues that come up in the mind, he doesn't lay them all out, doesn't define everything. He just says there are problems that can come up in the mind and you have to approach them with appropriate attention. Appropriate attention has a certain set of standards or a certain way of framing questions. You look for the stress and then you look for the cause of stress and what you could do to let go of that cause. That's the set of questions that appropriate attention applies to whatever comes up in the mind. Learn to look at everything simply as an issue of stress, its cause, and the way to the ending of stress. Instead of getting tied up in the idea that "I'm a horrible meditator, I can never do this," just put those thoughts aside. They've never helped anybody. Everybody has thought them, but they've never ever helped anybody.

So reflect on your meditation, remembering these factors. The set of three: mindfulness, ardency, alertness. And the set of four: desire, persistence, intent, analysis. When things aren't going well in your meditation, you can ask yourself, okay, which factors are not as healthy as they could be, as strong as they could be? And what you can do to encourage them to be stronger?

This is an important part of developing discernment in the path. Discernment isn't something you can manufacture simply by following a set of rules. It requires your full application of your attention, all your ingenuity, in figuring things out

on your own. That's how you exercise it. We all bring some discernment to the practice, but it's pretty weak. It's just like your body. If you want to make it strong, you don't simply wait for a strong body to come. You have to exercise whatever body you've got. That means putting it to use, and in putting it to use, you get stronger.

The same with your discernment: You take what discernment you have and you exercise it, trying to figure out what's going on in your mind, trying to figure out why the mind doesn't settle down, or when it does settle down, trying to figure *that* out, too. Once it settles down, figure out how you can keep it there. Because the process of getting the mind centered on an object and the of process keeping it there are two separates projects. They're connected but they're different. You can take advice from other people but you also need to figure things out on your own, because it's not always the case that there will be somebody sitting next to you, telling you to do this or do that. You've got to learn how to observe your own mind and to develop higher and higher standards of what it means for the meditation to work.

As you do that, your discernment gets exercise as well. You start seeing things you didn't see before, things that were hidden, but now, because you've exercised your discernment and developed these qualities of mind, they've become a lot clearer. That's how this skill that we're developing leads to the results we want.