

Mindreading

November 16, 2005

Which states of mind you tend to trust? It's an important question, because the ones you trust are the ones you spend a lot of time with, the ones you encourage, and by your encouraging them, they tend to grow. If you trust in your tendency to worry, that's going to take over the mind. If you trust your tendency to be calm, that'll overrun the mind.

The trick with all this is to learn that different states of mind have their values at different times. One of the wisest parts of meditation is learning how to figure out which state of mind you need at any particular time. For instance, that tendency to worry—even though, if you feed it too much, it can drive you crazy—still, at the base of it, has something called heedfulness, which is a very important quality in the practice. The same with calm. We know that one of the purposes of meditation is to bring the mind to calm. But too much calm can make you dull.

So an important part of the practice is learning what you need right now, and then also learning how to fulfill that need: in other words, to call up calm when you need it, to call up heedfulness when you need it. That's where the real skill in meditation lies.

Fortunately, there's one quality that is always applicable, always appropriate, and that's mindfulness, combined with alertness. In other words, keeping in mind the fact that you have to look after your mind and also remembering the various skills you've learned from meditation, being alert to what works and then remembering that: All of that comes under the quality of mindfulness. This is how meditation grows as a skill, and how you keep watch on things.

So each time you meditate, sit down and take a good look at the mind. As a Thai ajaan once said, see whether it's leaning forward or back, or the left or the right: forward in anticipation of future, back in remembrance of the past, and to left and the right toward things you like or dislike. See where the mind is too active or not active enough. Try to learn how to read your mind. And then meditate in appropriate way, so that you can bring the mind into balance.

For example, if things are too active, try to find something that's really soothing. You can think thoughts of goodwill, thoughts of compassion, thoughts of equanimity: These are soothing. You can work with the breath in a way that feels good for the body, relaxing the tension in different parts of the body. It provides you with a sense of fullness and ease. The sense of calm, the sense of

fullness is useful not only when the mind is feeling frazzled, but also when it's got a lot of work to do.

We were talking this afternoon about patience, and one of the important qualities that helps patience is having a good state of concentration that feels good, so that when you're being patient, developing powers of endurance is not a matter of simply gritting your teeth and putting up with things. You give the mind a good place to stay, so that whatever the weight is, it's not oppressive. You've got your nourishment: a state of fullness or rapture you can develop with the concentration. That's food for the mind.

And physically it feels good as well. The mind that's been wandering around, scattered all over the place, needs to have a place where it can settle down and rest and feed. Even the body gets worn down by the thoughts of the mind. That should tell you something about how much the body participates in the process of thinking. When you try to heal the mind from its excessive thinking, you also have to heal the body.

This is why the breath is such an important part of the meditation. The problem is that when things settle down, sometimes they settle down too much, and you start getting dull. That's when you should start working more actively with the breath in the body.

Or you can think about the parts of the body as well. One effective meditation is to go through the bones. Start with the first joint in each of the fingers and thumbs. Try to locate them: Where are they right now in your awareness? If you feel any tension around them, realize that there's no tension in the bones. If there's tension, it's the blood and the muscle and flesh surrounding the bones. So we relax that. You just want the bones, with everything relaxed around them.

Then you go to the second joints, and then the third joints, and then the bones in the palm of your hand, the wrists, the forearms, the elbows, up to the upper arms, shoulders. Then start again with the toes: first joints in the toes, second joints, on up through the feet and the legs, up through the pelvis and up the backbone and through the skull. In other words, give the mind work to do if it's getting kind of dull. Give it work to do that'll help keep it awake. You'll find that this kind of work within the body is also helpful for the purpose of discernment. You start looking at the body in a new way. You experience the body in a new way.

So remember that the important thing about meditation is balance. Often, to achieve balance, you to lean very far to the right or very far to the left. In other words, if you're tipping to far left, you've got to lean pretty hard to the right.

Tipping too far to the right? Okay, lean hard to the left. It's not a question of making a middling effort all the time. It means seeing what's needed and how much is need, and then providing it. This is the essence of right effort. Sometimes right effort in the practice is very gentle. Other times, you have to really put a lot of energy into it, depending on what's required.

So learn how to read your mind. Read the state of the mind, read the state of the body, and over time—through practice and trial and error—gain a sense of what kind of approach to meditation will bring a balance. The breath is ideal because you can use it for lots of different problems in the body and in the mind. When everything is too active, you can breathe in a calming way. When things are too sluggish, you can breathe in a way that's more energizing. You can use the breath as an object of tranquility and stillness, or you can use it as an object for developing insight and discernment. It's got lots of potentials.

So learn how to read your mind. Be able to step back from it a little bit and get a sense of perspective on it. Then provide it with what it needs. That right there is a lot of the skill of the meditation.