

Bare Attention

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The Buddha never taught bare attention. He taught appropriate attention. This is an important distinction to bear in mind. If we think that the heart of the meditation is just simply bare attention, it causes all kinds of misunderstandings – such as the idea that meditation is simply a process of watching whatever comes up and not doing anything about it. Or even deeper, there's the idea that if all you need to do is bare attention, why bother reading the Buddha's other teachings at all? Just try to be as passive as possible. You don't need to study. Just practice passive awareness and that will take care of all your problems.

Sometimes people say that bare attention is the unconditioned, that a moment of bare attention is a moment of awakening. If you believe that, you close all of the paths to awakening. Because if you don't see the difference between the path and the goal, you're never going to get the goal. You have to work on the path and then you have to let it go at some point, but if you don't do the work on the path, you never get there.

We're not trying to revert to some pre-existing state that the mind was in before it started getting subjected to all these nasty conditions that make us suffer. The mind itself actually goes out and is actively looking for conditions, it creates conditions. It's not an innocent victim. When you understand this point, that gets you on the path to appropriate attention. You see that everything you experience has an element of intentional input right here and now. Part of what you experience comes from the past, but a major part comes from what you're doing now.

You have to see that sometimes what you do is skillful and sometimes it's not. That's the basic framework for appropriate attention. It's the framework that gave rise to Buddha's teaching on the four noble truths. There are skillful mind states and unskillful mind states. States that make you suffer are the unskillful ones. States that lead you away from suffering are the skillful ones. You've got to look at experience in those terms. And how do you recognize them? How do you tell skillful mind states from unskillful ones? You look at them in terms of what they do.

The Buddha once said that he got on the right path simply by looking at his thoughts in terms of cause and effect. In other words, instead of getting in to a thought and driving off with it, he watched it: "Where does it go on its own? What does it lead to?" He found that thoughts imbued with sensual desire, ill-

will, or cruelty caused suffering. Thoughts that were free from those qualities were skillful thoughts. Even more skillful was to get the mind to settle down without having to think about anything much at all. Just focus on one topic. Get the mind in good strong concentration.

That's how he got on the path: by beginning to see the difference between cause and effect, skillful and unskillful, by focusing on the actions of his own mind.

This means that to develop appropriate attention in our own practice we've got to look in our own minds for what's skillful and what's not. That's the gauge for everything in the practice. This is why the Buddha never gave one-sided instructions on meditation, either totally passive or totally proactive. There's one point where, when he talks about right effort, he says that there are some times when you're letting things go along in their normal rate and everything is perfectly fine, you can live at your ease and there's no problem because the ease or pleasure is not giving rise to unskillful states. But if you find that there are times if you live at your ease and unskillful mind states do start multiplying, you've got to start making more of an effort and dealing more with pain—in other words, forcing yourself to do things you may not like to do.

On top of that, there are mind states that respond to simply watching. The Buddha never calls it bare awareness, though. He calls it equanimity. Even equanimity, here, is a fabricated state of mind. You make up your mind that you're not going to respond to anything. You're just going to watch. That's a very strong intention right there. And sometimes, that's all you need to deal with whatever is coming up. Sometimes it's all you *can* do with whatever's coming up.

But remember that it's just one tool in your tool chest. You also need the ability, the Buddha said, to work on things more proactively. There are times when you have to fabricate and think and analyze in order to get past a particular unskillful mind state, either by fabricating stronger concentration to resist it or by fabricating discernment to try to figure out ways of getting around the problem—taking it apart, seeing what makes it work, getting down to the nuts and bolts.

It's interesting that in the sutta where the Buddha talks about this—the issue of being passive or being more proactive—he doesn't give any examples; he doesn't give you any idea of which technique is going to work where. That's up to you to see for yourself, because different techniques will work at different times for different people.

That puts you on the spot. It means you have to be responsible. You have to actually look for yourself. And when you think about it, how else would you develop discernment? If you were simply trying to clone the Buddha's insights,

what would you see? You'd see what you had cloned. You'd see your preconceived notions of what his insights were. There is no guarantee at all that that would be insightful or especially helpful. The guarantee comes from your own looking and your own honesty in gauging the results.

This is why the path is one of heightening your powers of observation and building on your basic honesty. This is what enables you to see what works, what doesn't work, what really works, and what only seems to work.

So it may seem as if you've been set adrift without any clear instructions, but what the Buddha is doing is opening your mind to different possibilities. If you have a very narrow idea of what meditation is—that it's about not-thinking and just being passively aware—that ties your hands and feet. The defilements that don't respond to that approach will have free rein in your mind. They can do anything they want to.

One of the advantages of studying the texts and learning what the Buddha said is that it opens your mind to different possibilities. There can be a more proactive approach to meditation. The texts give you examples of how to think your way around lust, how to think your way around anger, fear, and all the other things that get in the way of getting the mind to settle down and gain insight.

And notice here that the insight here is always something that's very practical.

I was talking recently with someone who was reflecting on the whole problem of connecting compassion and wisdom. Often it seems as if they are two very different strains. In Buddhism you have the compassion strain where you have a big tender heart for all beings. And then there is the wisdom strain that tells you that there's no self or that beings have no self-nature, that there's nothing of any essence there—and the two teachings seem to have nothing to do with each other.

But if you look at the wisdom that the Buddha actually taught, you can see that it's not about metaphysical issues; and the compassion is not just having a big tender heart. It means taking your compassion seriously enough that you want to understand what really works to help to put an end to suffering.

So you can't just go on good intentions alone, or on a nice fuzzy warm feeling about people. You have to be responsible to see what works and what doesn't work in putting an end to the causes of suffering: When is it better to be quiet; when is it better to be more proactive? The four noble truths provide the framework for that, looking to see—when there's suffering—what's causing the suffering and then attacking the problem right at the cause.

When wisdom is expressed in this way, you can see the obvious connection between wisdom and compassion. The two have to go together. After all, goodwill is what underlies the teachings on the four noble truths. If there weren't the

desire for happiness, why would suffering and its end be the central issue of the teaching? The motivation for teaching the four noble truths had to be based on goodwill. The wisdom here is actually training your goodwill, training your compassion, both for yourself and for other people, so that your choice of when to be passive and when to be proactive really is conducive to happiness, really is conducive to the end of suffering.

When you have this framework in mind, that's when your attention will be appropriate. You're learning to look at the right issues. You have a wider sense of what's possible. But you also have a very precise sense of where you have to focus your attention, what kind of attention you bring to the moment, which details in the present moment are salient and which ones are totally irrelevant to the issue of suffering and its end. That's how your attention becomes healing attention, compassionate attention. It's well-informed, well-motivated. It's not "bare" at all.

So learn to inform your intention and inform your attention—both by becoming familiar with the Buddha's teaching and by looking in your own mind and seeing what works. After all, where does the Buddha's teaching come from? It comes from his experience of looking into his own mind and seeing what works—and seeing clearly enough that what worked for him was not just something that might work for a prince back in India, 2,500 years ago. It's something that gets down to the basic structure of how human beings suffer—how they cause themselves suffering—which applies not only to Asians but also to Americans, to people of all colors, of all nations, at all times.

So take that framework and learn to apply it to your present experience as skillfully as you can. Because it's in your effort to be skillful that you're going to develop both your compassion and your wisdom, along with the type of attention that does lead to the end of suffering.