

## *Bare vs. Appropriate Attention*

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As you focus on the breath, it's important that you try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels—in particular, to which ways of breathing feel comfortable, and which ones don't. Observe the breath carefully with that question in mind. When you find yourself stuck in uncomfortable breathing, experiment with other ways to see if you can make it more comfortable.

This is important for several reasons. One is that it's a lot easier to stay with the breath when it's comfortable than when it's not. And when you have a sense of comfort that comes from within, it's a lot easier to let go of your outside attachments. Instead of being hungry and looking for places to feed outside, you've got a good source of food for the mind inside.

But it goes deeper than that. You're also gaining practice in what's called appropriate attention, looking at things in terms of where there's stress, what's causing it, what you can do to put an end to stress. Those are the questions you have to bring to the practice at all times, regardless of what you're doing, because that's the only way you're going to overcome ignorance. After all, ignorance is just that: not looking at things in terms of the four noble truths, but looking in other terms.

These other terms can run the gamut. The Buddha gives a few examples: "Who am I? What am I? Do I exist? Do I not exist?" A lot of the questions we tend to bring to the practice: "Am I basically good? Am I basically bad? Am I basically enlightened? Am I basically unenlightened? Can I depend on my intuitions tell me the truth? Do I have to learn from somebody else?" Here you try to put those questions aside.

This is why the meditation is not simply a matter of just observing whatever's there, as if there were some ideal bare awareness that we can bring to things. We always bring agendas, we always bring questions, assumptions, to what we're doing, so it's important that we bring the right assumptions.

Back in the beginning of the 20th century, there were people in Asia who thought that you could reduce meditation to simply that: bare attention, simply observing things arising and passing away. The purity of that bare attention, they said, would guarantee purity of insight. Then they felt they had a method that could be exported to other countries as well. But what we found was that to whatever extent the method did work originally, it was because people were bringing their Buddhist training, their Buddhist assumptions to the practice. If you take a pure observing technique and put it another culture, people start bringing other questions to it, and all of a sudden meditation goes off in other directions.

Which simply goes to show that pure observation, or pure awareness, if it were possible, is not what the path is all about. You bring questions to the practice.

As the Buddha said, there are two things that can help spark awakening, just as there are two things that can help get in the way of awakening. The two things that spark awakening can be either the voice of another person, pointing you in the right direction, or appropriate attention, this skill in looking at things in terms of four noble truths. The two things that get in the way are again the voice of another person telling you something that's going to prevent you from looking at things in these terms, and inappropriate attention, when you look at your experience in any other way.

So remember, this is always in the background: "Where's the stress? Or what am I doing that's helping to put an end to stress?" Because as you apply these four categories to experience, sometimes you're placing more emphasis on one side than on another.

For example, as we're staying here with the breath, we're trying to develop as much concentration, as much mindfulness as possible. In other words, we're developing the path. If you're going to look at stress and pain with any equanimity, with any steadiness, the mind has to have a strong sense of a good solid foundation, a strong sense of inner well-being so that it doesn't feel threatened by the pain, doesn't keep giving in to its old agendas around pain, i.e., what to do to get rid of it, or how to run away from it, or how to just sit there and grit your teeth and bear it. The path is meant to give you a lot of help in standing up to the pain, whether it's physical pain or mental pain, and being able to sit with it but not suffer from it—to analyze it, to comprehend it. In other words, to exercise the skills that are appropriate for four noble truths.

This is why the Buddha taught the four noble truths, because as you analyze your experience in those terms, there's a duty that goes with each of them. As we're practicing, we're turning that duty into a skill. We're getting skillful at comprehending stress and pain, skillful in abandoning the cause, skillful at developing the path. So there are different things we could be doing right here, right now. We're not just watching or using just one approach. We have the four categories because they're four alternatives to what we could be doing.

So always keep those questions in the back of your mind because those are the questions to keep you on the path, and they point your practice in the direction of awakening.