

The Wisdom of Wising Up

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When you meditate during a Dhamma talk, pay very little attention to the talk. Give your primary attention to the meditation, to what you're doing right now: focusing on the breath. If you find the mind wandering off, bring it back. The talk helps you realize when you've wandered off. It acts like a fence. If you run up against the fence, you come back to the breath. It also helps point out things you might notice in the breath, ways you can deal with the breath to help the mind to settle down and feel secure and happy.

This can take time, getting the mind and the breath to settle down together. During that period of settling down, the mind can get discouraged and bored. It can find all sorts of reasons for not staying in the present, which aborts the process. To settle the mind takes not only time but also as few interruptions as possible. Ultimately, though, the mind can begin to notice that the act of focusing on the breath does give it a better place to stay. As results gradually build, the breath grows smoother. The energy in the body has fewer conflicts. It seems to flow in harmony and it provides a good, stable place to stay. The mind is able to settle down more quickly and securely.

Giving the mind a good foundation allows it to really see clearly what it's doing and to see where it's made mistakes. There's a lot to learn from mistakes, and yet most of us don't like looking at them. We pretend they didn't happen. If something in life goes badly, we tend to blame other factors, either other people or things totally beyond our control. There are times when problems do come from outside, but those aren't the ones that cause the most suffering, and they're not the ones you're responsible for. You're responsible for the areas where you can make choices. That's what you want to look for.

The Buddha once said that one of the signs of wisdom is recognizing your own foolishness, seeing where you've made mistakes. That gives you an opportunity to change your ways. As he says, "A fool who recognizes his own foolishness is to that extent wise." Even then, there are foolish and wise ways of looking at your own foolishness. To say, "I am a fool," closes off a lot of opportunities. If you're a fool, what are you going to do? There's not much room for self-improvement. Telling yourself, "I've *been* a fool," though, opens the possibility that you can change your ways. So, how do you recognize you've been a fool? You see the consequences of your actions. You did something and it caused harm, either to yourself or to other people, and yet you had a choice. You didn't have to choose to do that foolish action. Recognizing choices and recognizing the consequences of your choices teaches the important principle that the mind needs to be trained so it can make better choices. Always keep this in mind. It's the beginning of wisdom.

What causes you to make wrong choices? Three main things: faulty intentions, faulty perceptions, or paying attention to the wrong things. Ask yourself: "What was my perception of the situation? Why or how was it wrong? What signals were coming my way that I didn't pay attention to?" Sometimes you may have read the situation and signals very accurately, yet you still proceeded with what you wanted to do. That was your intention. That's the element of will.

So you can investigate three main questions: "What am I paying attention to? What is my perception? What is my intention?" As meditators, we learn how to explore all three of these questions.

First, we're taught to pay attention to where there's suffering and what's causing it. This can start on a blatant level in any area of life and then move into the mind. While meditating, consider what ways of breathing and focusing on the breath are causing stress.

As you're paying attention to the issue of stress, you can move to questions of perception, asking yourself how your perceptions are acting as a cause of stress, and how they might be converted to act as the

path to its end. You might ask: “Is this stress caused by the way I perceive the breath? What kind of mental picture do I have of the breathing process? How does that add to the stress? Where does it create barriers in the body that prevent the breath energy from flowing in easily?”

If you perceive the body as a bellows with only a tiny hole where the breath can come in, how about changing the perception to one where all your pores are holes where the breath can come in and out so you don't have to pull it in or push it out? Also, think of the breath permeating everywhere in the body, like water in a sponge. You can find other ways of perceiving, too. Try asking: “When the breath comes in, what direction does it flow in the body? Does it flow up? If it's flowing up, is it causing headaches?” If that's the case, let it flow down. There's a famous Zen monk of centuries past, Hakuin, who began suffering from what he called “Zen sickness.” Basically, it was excess energy going up into his head. His way of curing it was to think of a huge ball of butter on top of his head gradually melting. Each time he breathed in, the perception of melting butter allowed the breath energy to flow down.

Those are questions of perception. Then there are questions of intention.

As you're meditating, you're dealing very directly with intention. Are all the members of the committee on board with the desire to stay with the breath? Which ones aren't? When they're not on board, where do they want to wander? What are they looking for? Why?

The Buddha said to try to get the mind to settle down in right concentration, you have to seclude it from unskillful qualities. You have to seclude it from sensuality. Sensuality means your obsession with thinking about and planning sensual pleasures. All too often, when the mind finds it has an opportunity of a whole hour with no other responsibilities, it wants to think about sights, sounds, smells, tactile sensations, and flavors. All kinds of things: planning tomorrow's meal or reflecting on today's meal. Remind yourself, “That doesn't really accomplish anything.” The Buddha once said, “If you find yourself obsessed with sensuality, you'd be better off sleeping.” He never really encouraged sleep that much, but this is one case where sleep is the preferable alternative—better than obsessing over sensuality.

Still better is getting the mind out of the sensual realm and into the realm of form—your sense of the body from the inside—which is what you're developing while you're working with the breath energy in the body. So, if you find the mind wandering off to sensual pleasures, remind yourself, “This is not the time for that.” If it's really obsessed, you can remind yourself of all the dangers that come from sensuality. There are many passages in the Canon where the Buddha describes or gives examples and analogies to undercut the glamour and the allure that sensual pleasures have for us. They're like a drop of honey on the blade of a knife. They're like borrowed goods that the owners can take back at any time. Thinking about these analogies can help bring to your senses.

He said you also have to seclude the mind from unskillful qualities. This covers everything from wrong views, wrong resolves, any of the path factors that are wrong, that involve thoughts of cruelty or ill will. Even when people behave unjustly, you have to learn how to set aside thoughts of revenge, because they accomplish nothing good. Remind yourself that what other people do is their kamma; what you do is your kamma. You can't ultimately be responsible for their kamma; however, you can be responsible for your own actions. So, you spread thoughts of goodwill: thoughts that they may be happy, and especially that they may understand the causes for true happiness and then really act on them. That's a thought you can extend even to people who are really cruel. In fact, you especially want to extend that to cruel people so that instead of focusing on getting revenge or retribution, you open your mind to the question of what you might do or say that would actually get them to change their ways. That way *your* intentions become more skillful.

Sometimes it's good to do preventive strikes on wrong resolves before you settle down. If you know that the mind has been obsessing about a particular thought during the day, you've got to do some antidote thinking to pry the mind loose. Other times, you may realize the problems only after you've started settling down with the breath. Something springs up unexpectedly from just below the surface. For instance, you may start thinking about things you did or said in the past that you really regret. In that case, spread thoughts of

goodwill to whoever you harmed. Resolve not to repeat that mistake, and then get back to the breath, realizing that a mind well-centered, with a good solid foundation, is much more likely to be able to stick to its skillful intentions and results.

In this way, as you meditate, you learn the lessons that help you wise up after realizing you've been foolish. Strengthen these lessons by looking at your intentions, attention, and perceptions, and realize that these govern your actions. Remember: What you *do* is what matters. There's a clear distinction between skillful and unskillful. You don't want to act in unskillful ways. You've seen the harm.

This is the wisdom of wising up: recognizing when you've been a fool in any way. The lessons implicit in that wisdom include believing that choices are real; they have real consequences; those choices depend on views, which in turn are based on perceptions, attention, and intentions, what you would like to achieve through your actions. These are all important lessons. This is why the Buddha focuses on these elements as being crucial to what shapes your life so you can start shaping it in a wise way.

When you consider the Buddha's teachings—for example, the four noble truths, the three characteristics, the five hindrances—it's easy to dismiss them as cultural relics or somebody's personal proclivity. Why not five or three noble truths? Why does he focus on these particular teachings? Why focus on suffering? Was there something about his culture that kept him from seeing the beauty of life? Remember, though, that all of his teachings have their roots in some very common human experiences, in particular, the wisdom of wising up. It's about seeing when you've been a fool. It's not that you *are* a fool but you've *been* foolish. Keep that distinction in mind and use it to take heed of the lessons you can learn from having been foolish. Make the most of any opportunities to overcome this past foolishness and to act wisely. That's when you get in touch with the root values that led the Buddha to teach the way he did and to focus on the things he focused on. You see how wise he really was.

So take that wisdom of wising up and see how far it can go.