

The Self-correcting Mind

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Sometimes our evening chants can sound pretty depressing: We're subject to aging, illness, death, and separation; the world is swept away, it does not endure.

But these chants are just simple statements of fact. And sometimes the statement of fact is actually consoling. When we're suffering from aging, illness, death, or separation, it's good to be reminded that we're not the only ones. This is a fact of life for everyone. And it's good to face it squarely.

The Buddha was like a doctor. When you go to see a doctor and the doctor asks, "Where does it hurt?" you don't accuse the doctor of being pessimistic. The doctor's doing his job, recognizing that there's a hurt. But there's also the possibility of curing it. That's why the doctor's there.

If there are certain diseases the doctor's afraid to talk about, that's a sign that the doctor doesn't have a cure. But the Buddha talks openly and freely about aging, illness, death, separation, all the various forms of stress and suffering because he has a cure for them all. But it's a self-administered cure.

We learn from him, we learn from his example, we learn from the example of all the noble disciples in the Buddha's time on up into the present. Their example alerts us that the cure works, yet we don't have any proof until we've tried the cure ourselves. But at least seeing that there are examples out there—people who seem reliable and claim that they have gotten beyond all forms of suffering and stress—alerts us to the possibility that human life can be devoted, can be aimed in that direction and actually get results.

There's a story about when the Buddha was still a prince, thinking about going into the forest wilderness. His father tried to do everything he could to discourage him. In one version of the story, the father gets a devious friend to come and speak to the young prince, to say, "Well, other great people have tried in the past but they didn't succeed. Content yourself with the ordinary, everyday pleasures. That's the best that human life has to offer."

Fortunately the young prince was not swayed. He went out and actually found the path to the end of suffering.

But he also found that the path was something that had to be done within the mind—because we suffer from our lack of skill in how we handle sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and all the thoughts of the mind. No one else can make us skillful. Other people can show us by example that the skill can be mastered, they can give us pointers, but we have to do the work ourselves.

We have to learn how to look inside to see what strengths we have and learn how to utilize them, realizing that one of our problems is delusion. This is why we need the teachings from

outside from someone else to alert us to what might go wrong.

We also need to be self-correcting. That chant just now of the world being swept away: The practice is like building a house on sand. The sands shift. And so for the house to be really stable, it has to have some sort of self-correcting mechanism inside like a gyroscope in the house (this image is going to start falling apart pretty soon, but you get the basic idea). You can't depend on the world outside for your stability or your balance or any real solidity in life. This is why the mind has to learn how to be self-correcting.

For this reason, evaluation is an important part of the meditation. We're working with the breath. It's not just a matter of in, out, in, out, in, out. We have to learn how to ask ourselves:

What kind of breathing can the mind stay with?

What kind of breathing feels good for the body?

What kind of breathing feels good for the mind?

What kind of breathing is clear enough so we can focus on it but soothing enough so that it's actually calming, allows the mind to settle down?

Then once the breath feels good, what do you do with that good feeling?

Ajaan Lee suggests spreading it around the body. You read his different Dhamma talks and writings, and you find that he has lots of different ways of suggesting how you do this. So you try his ways, and if they don't work, you start thinking up your own.

This is what it means to use evaluation.

As Ajaan Fuang used to say, the two things you need to develop your skills in evaluating are, one, to be observant, and two, to be ingenious. They're the two faculties you've got to use: watching what's going on and if something doesn't seem to be working out right, trying to figure out what might work. Then you test it, evaluate it, observe the results.

This way, the mind becomes self-correcting and learns to explore possibilities that it might not have thought of before. As the Buddha said, there's the discernment that comes from listening and there's the discernment that comes from thinking things through. But the discernment that really works in making a difference for the mind, allowing it to gain release from its suffering, is the discernment that comes from developing qualities in the mind.

This means that the understanding you're going to gain as you work at the meditation is going to show you new possibilities that even the writings don't suggest. So it's especially important as we meditate, as we learn how to train this faculty of evaluation, to notice when things are in balance and when they're getting out of balance and what we might do to get them back in.

After all, the mind has to be its own teacher. You learn from external teachers, but external teachers can't keep looking at your mind all the time. Even if they could read minds, it's asking too much of them to be reading your mind 24/7. You've got to learn how to read your own mind 24/7, to gain an idea of the different ways it might go out of balance.

There's one passage where the Buddha compares the training of the mind to the work of a

goldsmith. The goldsmith has to blow time and again on the gold he put in the smelter. He has to sprinkle water on it time and again and he has to evaluate it, watch it carefully, examine it, time and again. The combination of these three things is what gets the gold properly melted, properly purified, malleable, so that the goldsmith can make what he wants out of the gold.

If he did just any one thing, it wouldn't work. If he just sprinkled water on it, the gold would never get melted; it'd cool off too fast. If he just blew on it, the gold would burn up too fast. If he just looked at it, nothing would happen. So it's a balance of those three faculties, those three activities, that gets the gold ready to mold.

The same way when you're meditating: There are three themes you have to keep in mind. The first is the theme of concentration, which would be any of the establishings of mindfulness: the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind, mental qualities in and of themselves.

For instance, right now when you're with the breath, you've got the body in the actual sensation of the breath. And then there are the feelings of pleasure or pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain that come from the way you deal with the breath. Then there are the various mind states that are either with the breath or wandering away. Whatever questions you might have about how your mind is going, you can observe it right here in how well it relates to the breath.

And then there are the different mental qualities. Are you tied up in the hindrances or actually developing the factors for awakening? And these factors for awakening: Are they coming in a balanced way?

All of these things are the themes of concentration. You want to stay focused on these things, make them your frame of reference.

But just staying with the breath, if you could just do that, would not be enough. You need two other themes to think about. One is what the Buddha calls "the theme of uplifting—in other words, energizing the mind so that if it sees any unskillful qualities in the mind, it doesn't just sit there and watch them. It actually tries to figure out how to abandon them. If it sees anything lacking, it tries to figure out how to give rise to the skillful qualities that make up for the lack. You have to put effort and energy into this.

The third theme is equanimity, which means being able to watch what's happening in a calm and unruffled way. Watch your actions, watch the results and learn how to be a reliable observer of what's actually happening.

Now, any one of these qualities, the Buddha said, if you do it just on its own, won't get you anywhere. If you just stay with the concentration, you're going to fall into laziness. If you just stay with trying to energize yourself, you get restless and worked up.

If you just stay with equanimity you never really get into the proper concentration that would count as right concentration. Things just arise and pass away, and they just arise and pass away. That's it. Nothing gets developed, nothing gets abandoned. You see things arise and pass away and you say, "Well, they do it on their own, I don't have to do anything." But they're going

to keep on arising and passing away, and that doesn't get you past suffering.

So you've got to learn how to bring all these three qualities together. You want to stay concentrated and focused on your basic frame of reference, you want to energize yourself to do whatever activity is needed to get more and more skillful in ferreting out unskillful states of mind and helping skillful ones, learning how to abandon whatever needs to be abandoned, to develop whatever needs to be developed. And the equanimity is there to help prevent the mind from getting restless or worked up about this.

You've got to bring all of these qualities into balance. Otherwise, the mind won't be able to find the refuge that it needs—which, after all, is what the practice all comes down to: We're trying to find a safe place for the mind, a safe place to protect what's valuable in the mind and to stay away from danger. Aging, illness and death are coming. Separation has happened and it's going to keep on happening. The world is constantly swept away, it doesn't endure, there's nobody in charge, nothing that really belongs to it. And if we're not careful, we just keep coming back and back and back, trying to find satisfaction in these unstable, unreliable things, all through the force of craving.

So we've got to learn how to see through the allure of that craving to understand why we get involved with it, why we keep pushing, pushing, pushing for things that are going to keep on disappointing, disappointing, disappointing. This is why the mind has to learn how to observe itself.

We talk about the committee of the mind. This is one area where the committee can actually be useful. You have different members: You have the equanimity member, you've got the concentration member, you've got the uplifting energy member. And you want them to work together, to get coordinated, to be able to observe one another, to see where things are lacking, see where things are too much.

You can't depend on a Johnny-one-note kind of meditation where it's just equanimity or just stillness or just noting or just anything. Training the whole mind requires a combination of a whole range of factors. Otherwise, it's like trying to build a house with nothing but a hammer, or trying to bake a cake with nothing but flour. You don't get anywhere because a lot of the essential ingredients, a lot of the essential tools are missing.

So remember, you've got to train the mind to be your own teacher, your own evaluator of what's going on. And you want to train it to be self-correcting, so that the mind doesn't fall off into any one extreme: extreme equanimity or extreme concentration or extreme effort. These three qualities have to learn how to work together for us to find the release and the refuge that we want and need.