

Turn Off the Automatic Pilot

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The part of the mind that keeps shaping experience is something that lies very deep. And it's something we're often not paying attention to. We're more interested in the effects outside—so interested in things outside that we lose touch with where they come from. The part of the mind that shapes things is responsible for things we're doing right now, and in the past, of course, it was responsible for things we were doing then. And what we're experiencing right now on another level is the combination of all the results of all those choices, all those ideas, all those intentions. This is why when you go deep in your meditation, it's not so much a matter of hiding out or curling up. You're going in to find out what is it inside the mind that keeps pushing you to shape this, shape that, fabricate this, fabricate that.

If you learn how to fabricate things well, it has a good impact inside, outside—it has a good impact all around. This is why the practice of meditation is said to be meritorious. We don't usually think about the word “merit” when we come to meditation, but there is a lot of merit in what we're doing. Your mind is like a radio transmitter, sending out energies in all directions, lots of different levels, so you want to make sure that you're sending out good energy. This is the one thing about which you can really be responsible in your life. There are a lot of other things you've shaped in the past, and it's beyond your control how they're going to come back at you. But what you're doing right now can be under your control if you pay a lot of attention.

You look at the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation, and he mentions the word “fabrication” an awful lot. You try to be sensitive to the bodily fabrications, which is the way you breathe, and you try to calm it down. You try to be sensitive to mental fabrications, your thoughts of how you perceive things, how you feel things, and you try to calm that down as well.

So when you're working with the breath, you're engaging in these processes of fabrication very directly. If you hold certain perceptions of the breath in mind, and you think of the breath energy as a continuum throughout the body, that's going to change the way you feel the breathing. You also notice how much pressure you're putting on the breath. In fact, it's one of the first things you begin to notice as soon as you focus on the breath: You're going to start controlling it. And if you try to tell yourself, “I'm just going to be with the breath as it is naturally,” the controlling element goes underground where you're not

acknowledging it. That's not healthy. So you try to bring it up into your conscious awareness.

How can you breathe in a way that feels really good? If you haven't been paying much attention to the breath, it's going to take a while to get sensitive to what really does feel good for the body. Because when you're using your mind for other things, the breath energy gets trampled on. And, as with anything that's been trampled on a lot, it gets numb, or you get numb to it. So when you start paying attention to it you're going to come in with a lot of preconceived notions of how it should be, and you're going to try to force it in that direction. And then you get frustrated when you find it doesn't feel so good. You have to be patient. It takes a while for the sensitivity in your body to spring back. So you want to make a survey of the body to see where exactly you do have a sense of one way of breathing being more comfortable than another way of breathing. Focus on those areas first. Let them have their fill of good breath energy, and then from there you start spreading out into other areas, where you get more and more sensitive as time goes on.

As you get more sensitive to how you're fabricating the breath, you begin to look in other areas of your life as well, realizing that you have more control over certain parts of the mind that were previously on automatic pilot. Well, who designed that automatic pilot? Who set the automatic pilot? Usually, if we're not paying attention, greed, aversion, and delusion get to determine the default settings. This means you have to learn how to question them.

This is one of the reasons why we read Dhamma books: They help us question areas that we previously didn't question before. We just felt: This is the way it has to be, this is the way it is naturally, or whatever. So we just accept that and put up with it. We thought we were doing the right thing, we thought we were actually getting pleasure out of it. There are lots of different reasons why we go along with the default settings. But we're not paying careful attention.

If you really start paying careful attention, you start seeing that there are areas where you're adding a lot of stress where you don't have to. It may not seem like much stress from moment to moment, but it builds up. Try to catch these habits of the mind where you're applying too much stress, applying too much pressure, or shaping things in a way that's really not good for you. It's only when you sense these things that you realize that maybe there's a choice, maybe there is another way, and you start looking for the other way.

So as you try to get more and more sensitive to these areas inside, it can't help but have an impact on the areas outside in our life as well. It works both ways. When you decide that you're going to observe the precepts, you suddenly run up

against areas where you've been negligent or not really paying much attention. And, that too, helps to make you more sensitive. Then you can take that increased sensitivity and bring it inside. And you take the sensitivity you've developed inside and bring it outside.

All the different areas of your life, if you treat them as part of the practice, help one another as you gain in this kind of sensitivity. You pick up areas in your awareness that you've never noticed before because you were just trampling all over them.

This is an important part of the meditation: getting off of our automatic pilot. We're used to letting it run things, so it's going to be awkward in the beginning as we try to develop these different kinds of sensitivity. But after a while you'll find that it really is a lot better. You're quicker to sense when you're doing something unskillful, so you can learn how to stop. You develop a taste for developing skillful qualities in the mind and you can bring this into your relations with other people; you can bring this deeper into your meditation. The good effects spread in all directions.

It's like the ripples in a pond. When you throw a stone into a pond, the ripples don't always go out in the direction in which you threw the stone. They come back at you as well. They go in all directions. This is why at the end of the meditation we dedicate the merit of the meditation to other people, people we know personally who have helped us, people who have helped us in other ways—we may not know them personally but we know that they've been having a good impact on our lives—and then to all beings.

Because you want to be sensitive in all areas of your life, try to get the mind off of automatic pilot. Even though it may be disorienting in the beginning, you find that everything goes a lot better when you put the time and energy into focusing on the area of life where you really do have responsibility, you really do have the opportunity to make the choice, and you shape things in a direction that's for the good of everyone.