

On Top of Your Actions

December 10, 2014

It's always good at the beginning of the meditation to survey your mind to see what kind of shape it's in, and figure out what needs to be done to bring it into balance. Are you leaning toward thoughts of the future or toward thoughts of the past? Things that put you in a good mood, things that put you in a bad mood?

Try to learn how to read your own mind, and then you'll have a good idea of how to start the meditation.

We want to get down to the breath. But sometimes there are other things in the way, so we have to clear them out first.

Some of the problems might come from things you did or said in the course of the day. You can't go back and undo them, but you can make up your mind, "Okay, I recognize that that was wrong," and you make a vow to yourself that you're going to learn how to not repeat that mistake.

This is one of the reasons why we have the principles of right action and right speech as part of the path. Without them, you really can't get the mind into right concentration.

A lot of people want to go straight from right view to the meditation side. But the meditation side of the practice has to work its way through right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort. So you want to make sure that all those factors are present.

At the moment, you're not doing anything externally, you're not saying anything externally. But if part of the mind reflects back on something you did or said in the course of the day and you know that it was not right speech, you have to recognize that. And that puts the mind on the right track.

The same with right action: Anything you did that was opposed to the principles of right action, you want to make sure you recognize it was wrong. That way, at the very least, you've got right view operating here.

Then you can get down to work. What are the unskillful qualities here? As the passage just now said, any unskillful qualities in the mind: What can you do to make sure they don't arise, and if they're there, what can you do to get rid of them? As for skillful qualities, what can you do to make them stronger? How do you strengthen your mindfulness, how do you strengthen your concentration?

Just keep coming back. You have to be really on top of things.

Right effort is what puts a little push on things. It basically comes down to the desire to really do this well. We've been mucking around in our lives long enough.

It's time that we got down to work. So whatever way you can motivate yourself to being serious about being mindful, to being serious about being concentrated—not necessarily grim or glum—just do it well.

This opportunity to practice doesn't come to everybody. The world around us is pretty much of a turmoil right now. We've got a little quiet spot here for the time being at least, so get your minds ready. Even if things don't become a turmoil here, your body is a turmoil waiting to happen. Aging is going to happen, illness is going to happen, death is going to happen, all because of this body.

You have to ask yourself, "Are you ready for it?" If not, what needs to be done? What work do you need to do on your mind? Okay, you've got the opportunity to do that right now, so take advantage of it.

The Buddha talks about generating desire. You can generate it through heedfulness. You can generate it through compassion: compassion for yourself, compassion for other people, other beings: the fact that if you practice well, life is a lot easier for everybody around you.

You can work with pride and shame. Pride in the sense that you want to master this skill. Shame in the sense that you think about all the time you've spent on this, and there's still a lot of work to be done. So get to work.

Whatever motivation you find is working for you right now, give yourself a pep talk using that. Then try to stay on top of things in the body and the mind right now, right now, right now. This is where all the important things are happening.

The news may tell us that other things in other parts of the world are really important, really worth getting worked up about. And people do get worked up about them. But as the Buddha said, you're not going to go to hell or to heaven because of other people's actions. It's *your* actions that take you to hell, your actions that can get you to heaven, your actions that can get you beyond heaven and hell, taking you all the way to nibbana.

So you want to be on top of what you're doing right here, right now. Because this is where all the issues are, all the factors of the path—as we chanted about them just now. Even though some of them have to do with your outside actions, they basically come down to your intentions.

In terms of right speech: When you lie, the intention is to misrepresent the truth. When you speak divisively, it's to break people apart. When you speak harshly, it's basically to hurt other people's feelings. It's all a matter of intention.

When you engage in idle chatter, you just let your mind and mouth run without any clear intention—which usually ends up in getting involved in some unskillful intentions.

It's all coming out of the heart, all coming out of the mind.

The same goes with right action. To kill, steal, engage in illicit sex: Even when we're not doing those things on the outside level, sometimes the mind's really involved with them.

The same with right livelihood: If your livelihood is engaged in something that's oppressive to other people, you're going to deny it. That puts up a huge wall between you and the opportunity to gain some insight.

So all these factors of the path, even the outside ones, are focused back in, right here, because right here is where you're generating suffering and this is where you can learn how to stop it.

So try to bring your attention to what you're doing right now. Your ability to reflect on your state of mind, reflect on the actions of the mind, is where you can start reading things inside. You can get a pretty clear sense of the work that needs to be done.

It's very easy to get sloppy or complacent about this, but the Buddha said that your sense of heedfulness is what's going to see you through. If you put things off until tomorrow or the next hour or to any other place, the work is not going to get done. You don't know how much time you have. So try to be on top of what's happening right now.

And learn how not to see things in line with your old biases. The Buddha talks about being biased through things you like, through things that you're angry at, biased through fear, biased through delusion.

In Thai they call this taking sides with yourself. In other words, whatever your opinions are, you tend to see things, "It's got to be true that way." The only hope you have for any kind of practice is to be able to step back from your opinions and from your old habits and say, "Wait a minute. This is not working. Something needs to be done." That's where the path begins.

So be on top of what you're doing. In other words, part of the mind is doing something but another part has to observe it.

This is where the committee of the mind actually becomes a useful thing. If there were just one of you in there, there'd be no way that you could question your opinions, because your opinions would be your opinions and that would be that. But if you realize that there are other beings in here, other voices, other opinions in there, try to figure out which ones are speaking wisdom right now and listen to them.

Get to the observer who wants to watch the ones that are acting. That way you can use the committee of the mind to good advantage.