

Insight Is a Judgment Call

February 21, 2017

Focus on your breath and try to figure out the best way to focus on the breath. This is a quality called evaluation. It's pretty simple. You're with the breath, but there are lots of ways of breathing and lots of ways of being with the breath: where you're going to focus in the body; how long the breathing's going to be, how short, heavy, light, shallow, deep; what image of the breath you're going to hold in mind. There are lots of options. Which means there's lots of room to play, but the "play," here, has a serious purpose. We're trying to get the mind as firmly established as possible with a sense of well-being, a sense of balance.

So experiment. And if you're not sure if one breathing method feels better than another, just try it for a while and see what it does to the body, see what it does to the mind. Then change and try that one for a while. You could spend the whole hour doing this.

What you're doing is getting more sensitive to what you're doing and the results of what you're doing, right here, right now—and also more sensitive to what it feels like to have a sense of well-being in the body. In the beginning, it's going to be pretty ordinary, sitting here without any pains. Or if there are pains in the body, focus on the parts that are not, but they're going to seem pretty ordinary. But if you give them some space, give them some time, you begin to see that the breath energy going through the body can have an impact: either tensing things up or helping things to relax; giving energy or taking energy away. And that sensitivity is what you want to get more and more attuned to, because you're going to use that sensitivity to make judgments in other areas of your life as well.

That's what the practice is all about: making judgments. We hear so much about how meditation is learning about how to be non-judging, but I can't find that idea anywhere in the Buddha's teachings. He meant evaluation to be a kind of judgment, and you want to develop that quality of the mind so that you can use it skillfully—so that you can be judicious in your judgments, rather than judgmental, and also sensitive to what you're doing. Because it's what we're doing that ties us down.

The Buddha's image is of a fire. The fire clings to its fuel, and as long as it's burning it's trapped by its fuel. When it goes out, that's when it's released from the fuel. It goes out, not because the fuel lets go of the fire, but because the fire lets go of the fuel. That's how they

understood the process of fire in his time, and that's the analogy the Buddha applied to the mind. We're holding on to things that are making us suffer and how do we get release from them? We don't wait for them to let us go. We learn to let *them* go. And we do that by passing judgment on what we're doing as to whether it's worth doing or not.

The Buddha illustrates this with the analogy of a bronze cup filled with a beverage that looks very enticing. In one case, the beverage is healthy for you; in the other case, the beverage can kill you, or at least cause you a lot of pain. Thirsty people come along, and the vendors of the beverage say to each of the people, "Okay, here's this beverage which is good for you, and here's this beverage which is poisonous." Sometimes they don't give you the choice, it's just the poisonous beverage. And they say, "You're thirsty? Well, here's this poisonous beverage. It looks very enticing. And it's in a nice bronze cup. It's going to taste very nice as you drink it, but it's going to make you sick, bringing about death or death-like pain." And as the Buddha said, it's the wise person who will say, "No, there are other things I could drink. I'll put up with my thirst for the time being." The unwise person will take the beverage. He doesn't care about the consequences because he's so thirsty.

That's the problem with most of us: We're so thirsty for things that we grab on to anything without thinking of the long-term payback. We'll do all kinds of things because we think it's worth it, or if we think of the payback down the line, we say, "I'll deal with that later, but I want something that I like right now." The ability to say No to things like that is a measure of your wisdom, a measure of your discernment, and it comes down to seeing what's worth doing, what's not worth doing.

Like the fact you're meditating right here, right now: You probably didn't think about meditating as soon as you came out of your mother's womb. It has taken time and a lot of experience for you to realize that this is something you'd actually want to do: to sit here in one position for an hour with your eyes closed, focusing on your breath. I've encountered a lot of people who, even though they have been through a lot of suffering in life, would never want to do this.

We had a woman who came here once because a friend had brought her. We had a group sit for an hour out under the trees. It was a lovely day, sitting out at the outdoor classroom. The temperature was just right, not too hot, not too cold, with a little bit of a breeze. And after she came out of the meditation the woman said, "I've never suffered so much in my life." In another case, I was invited back to teach meditation at my old college. One of the students, after fifteen

minutes, came out of meditation and complained that he had been going through sensory deprivation. He was totally disoriented. So a lot of people don't see what we're doing right now as worth it. In fact, they see it as something they'd want to run away from.

But we've begun to see that the question of whether we're going to be happy in life or suffering in life is going to depend on the quality of our mind. And how do you develop the quality of your mind? Through mindfulness, alertness, sitting here with the breath. You develop a lot of good qualities this way. This is how your discernment develops.

Things that you used to see as worth doing, the games you used to play as a child, the things you did when you were a teenager: As you grow up and get more mature, you realize they're not worth it. And things that as a child, as a teenager, might never have appealed to you, suddenly make a lot of sense because you've been observant. Well, that's the principle that carries you all the way through the practice. You learn to be more and more discerning about what you're doing, the results, and what's worth doing, what's not worth doing.

When the Buddha talks about insight, vipassana, he doesn't teach a technique. He calls vipassana a quality of the mind, a clear-seeing quality of the mind. And what does it see? It sees things as they arise, along with what's making them arise, and then sees them as they pass away. At the same time, while it watches things arise, it begins to see their allure: why you want to go with them. It sees the drawbacks, and it weighs the drawbacks against the allure. Then when it sees that the drawbacks outweigh the allure, that's when it can find an escape from things through dispassion.

That's how insight works. It passes judgment. Judiciously. It's simply a question of how sensitive you are and what options you see. If something is the best possible thing, if you think the poison in the cup is the only thing you're going to be able to drink, you might go for it. But when you realize that there are better options, then you're going to be less and less likely to go for the things with drawbacks. You want something whose allure doesn't contain any poison.

So as you're sitting here meditating, working on your evaluation, working on figuring out what the mind wants to go for right now, the Buddha's image for what you're doing is of a cook who's sensitive to what his master likes. The foolish cook just keeps producing food and doesn't really notice what the master eats, what he likes, what he praises. The intelligent cook listens, notices. Sometimes he doesn't even have to listen, he just watches: What does the master reach for? What does he take again and again? Okay, make more of that. The same with your mind: You've got to learn how to observe your mind. What does the mind go for as

you try to get it settled down with the breath? What kind of breathing does it like? What kind of breathing does it not like? Where does it like to be focused?

Observe these things. And then observe what could be better in terms of getting the mind more solidly settled down. What are the activities you're doing that don't need to be done? Sometimes we find that we're breathing mechanically simply because we feel the need, or that we're obliged to breathe with a certain amount of strength and energy put into the breath. But what if calmer breathing were better?

And how do you calm the breathing down without suppressing it? Well, you connect all the breath energies in the body, and when everything's connected, you're just very still with that. The need to breathe grows more and more still, and at the same time the body is filled with good breath energy. You've developed a sense of well-being that's more solid. It requires more care in getting it and maintaining it, but at the same time, a lot less energy has to go into it. The payback is a lot bigger. We keep doing that. Noticing, noticing, noticing. Observing. Experimenting. That's how your sensitivity develops as to what's worth doing and what's not.

This is one of the big problems in life: that we have a very bad sense of judgment as to what's worth doing, what's not. You drive up the road to Las Vegas and you see the big signs. They advertise "93% payback rate," and people keep going there week after week, even though they're basically telling them, "You give us a dollar and we'll give you 93 cents back." Somehow the thrill is worth it, thinking that maybe someday they'll give us more than the dollar. A few people get more than the dollar, but most people don't. That's why they say it's a 93% payback rate.

There are so many things in life where we dress things up to seem a lot more attractive than they really are. We fool ourselves, and part of the mind likes to be fooled. But there should be another part of the mind that says, "I've had enough. I want something better." And that's the part of the mind you want to listen to. That's the part of the mind that'll get you to release.

Because that's what release is: the mind letting go through its discernment of what's not worth doing anymore. And you get there by taking that question and consistently pursuing it further and further in. You try to see: What's the best thing that the mind can fabricate? There are some very subtle states of concentration, very strong. And as you develop them, you find yourself getting attached to them. But that's okay, because that attachment allows you to let go of attachments, say, to sensuality, to unskillful thoughts, or even to weaker and less subtle states of concentration. We finally get to the point where this is the best that fabrication can offer.

And you begin to see that this, too, has its drawbacks.

That's when the mind is really willing to give the unfabricated a try. It sees its potential value for happiness. Up to that point, there's something about lack of fabrication in the mind that scares it. But there comes a point where the mind is no longer scared, and that's when it can let go.

But it starts with this ability to evaluate: What are you doing? What are the results? Are the results worth it? What might be better? If you keep those questions in mind, they'll take you all the way.