

Attention with an Agenda

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The question sometimes arises: Why was it that there were pupils in the Buddha's time who listened to Dhamma talks and were immediately able to gain stream entry? The Buddha himself explained that they had five qualities to their listening. One, they didn't despise the Dhamma. Two, they didn't despise the speaker. Three, they didn't despise themselves. In other words, they were confident that listening to the Dhamma, they could follow through with it.

The next quality was that they would unify their minds around the talk. In other words, they listened with their whole mind. The mind wasn't scattered. The word for unification that the Buddha uses here, *ekaggata*, is the same word he would use for concentration in general. So you concentrate on the talk, and then finally you apply appropriate attention. Notice, that's *appropriate* attention, not bare attention. The Buddha never talks about bare attention. He talks only about two kinds of attention: appropriate and inappropriate.

Appropriate is when you take the lesson and you ask yourself, "How does this apply to the question of what is skillful, what is not skillful?" Then you try to carry through. If it points out that something is unskillful, you try to abandon it whenever it appears in the mind. If it's skillful, you try to develop it.

This framework, with time, mutates into the four noble truths. Here again, you have truths with duties. You're not just passively watching. You realize there's something to do. Suffering is to be comprehended. Its cause is to be abandoned. Its cessation is to be realized, and the path to that cessation is to be developed. You realize there're tasks to be done and you follow through with them. That's the appropriate response to appropriate attention.

So when you think about gaining insight into the mind as you're meditating, remember that it's an issue of appropriate attention combined with the singleness of mind that allows you to see. You're looking with a purpose. It's not simply to see things, witness things as they arise and fall away independent of you. You realize that you're implicated in what's going on right now. After all, look at the factors leading to attention. The main factor is fabrication. The present moment is fabricated—through *your* fabrication. It's something you put together in three ways—bodily, verbally, mentally. That right there tells you that you're not here just to watch the present moment. The nature of fabrication is that it has a purpose. You do something for the sake of something. You put things together, you breathe for the sake of something. You direct your thoughts and you evaluate

for the sake of something. You apply different perceptions and focus on different feelings for the sake of something.

Like right now: You're trying to get the mind into concentration. So you breathe in a way that will give rise to a sense of comfort for the sake of getting the mind into concentration. You use directed thought and evaluation, again for the sake of getting the mind to be willing to settle down, giving it a good place to settle down so that it's happy to settle down. Then you use whatever perceptions and focus on whatever feelings will be conducive to settling down.

So it's not just a matter of watching the present moment. The question when you're meditating is: How should you fabricate the present moment in such a way so that you can see fabrications clearly? The main issue of fabrication is establishing mindfulness and getting the mind into concentration. So there's an agenda—because there's another dimension to those three kinds of fabrication. The Buddha says in a larger framework that bodily fabrication applies to any bodily action that will have an impact on future lives. Verbal fabrication, any verbal action, mental fabrication, any mental action that will have impact on into future lives.

So you realize that as you're sitting here meditating, you're focusing on the germs of these things. Any bodily action has to begin with the breath. Any verbal action has to begin with directed thought and evaluation. Any mental action has to start with the perceptions and feelings. So right there you're watching the present moment but you also realize that what you choose to do, how you choose to shape the present moment, is going to have a long-term impact.

This is why we establish mindfulness in the way we do. It's done with a purpose. You're fabricating for the sake of getting the mind into concentration, using mindfulness, alertness, and ardency to do that. Mindfulness is to remind yourself of what lessons you've learned from the past and also to remind yourself of what actions you've done, because you're trying to figure out cause and effect. If you forget what you did, then when an effect comes, you're not going to know where it came from. You have to be clear about what you're doing so that you can remember. You're alert both to what you're doing and to the results you're getting from what you've done.

What makes these qualities special and wise is ardency. You want to really do this well. It's interesting: When the Buddha defines mindfulness, it's a neutral quality. You can be mindful of anything, good or bad. Alertness is also neutral: You can be alert to any action, good or bad. But ardency always has to do with what's skillful. That's the wisdom element in those three qualities.

So as you focus on the breath, you're alert to what the breath is doing. You're alert to how the mind is relating to it. You remember what you've done in the past that's helped you settle down. And you really try to do this well. When you do, you get the mind into concentration. That's what you're trying to fabricate so that you can see fabrications clearly. After all, the best way to see skillful mental factors is to engage in them, reminding yourself that you're not just watching things arise and pass away. You're actually determining what you're going to do and then you look at the results.

Now, as the mind settles in and gets really clear and still, that's when issues of insight come up. Of course, you have to have some insight to get the mind to settle down to begin with. But then as the mind gets into concentration, you develop more insight, deeper insight, subtler insight. Here again, it's not just a matter of watching things or accepting things as they are. You're looking at them from the point of view of how to gain dispassion so that you can free yourself from them. You're looking in terms of the four noble truths. That's what appropriate attention is about. And one of those noble truths is the third noble truth: There is cessation of suffering when you develop dispassion for craving and the things that lead to craving.

Fabrication is one of the things that leads to craving. So how do you develop dispassion for it? The Buddha didn't teach a vipassana technique, but he did recommend a series of questions for developing insight into fabrications: "How should I look at fabrications? How should they be regarded? How should they be let go?" He lays out a general plan. You look at how they're originated—what gives rise to them—how they pass away, what their allure is, and why you would want to keep on fabricating those things. Then you look for the drawbacks of those kind of fabrications.

Looking for the allure is going to be difficult because often it's something you're embarrassed about. I don't know how many people say they get angry, that they don't like their anger at all but they keep on getting angry. Actually, they don't see why they like their anger because their reasons for liking the anger are things they're embarrassed about, so they hide them.

One of the reasons we practice concentration is so that we can look into the mind and observe the things we ordinarily don't like to see there. If you refuse to see them, there's no way you can let go of them. So it's a question of admitting what's there from the point of view of a mind that's well settled. You can really see why you go for a particular unskillful mental state. And it's a lot easier to admit the drawbacks and to develop dispassion when the mind is well settled. As for the drawbacks, that's the area in which you start applying those three perceptions—

the fact that they're inconstant, they're stressful, not worthy of being called "you" or "yours"—again, with the purpose that you want to let go.

You have an agenda. These are value judgments because you're looking again in terms of that third noble truth. If it weren't for the third noble truth, just telling yourself, "This is inconstant, stressful and not-self, I've got to learn how to accept these things and just be okay with the fact that I can't find anything substantial in my life": That's a recipe for depression. We're not doing this to get depressed. We're doing this to free the mind. The freedom we're after is not freedom from hope or freedom from satisfaction. It's freedom from suffering. The whole point is that we find the ultimate happiness, and that comes through dispassion. It's because we have conviction in the four noble truths, and the third one in particular, that we're looking for reasons to let go.

When we can let go, that's when we find that what the Buddha said was true—there really is a deathless element that you can contact, you can touch inside. It is the highest happiness.

This is why it's important to remember that we're not here to apply bare attention, because there is no such thing as bare attention as far as the Buddha is concerned. We're here to develop *appropriate* attention and then apply it to look at what's going on with a purpose of fulfilling the duties of the four noble truths. Nobody is imposing these duties on us. The Buddha himself didn't impose them on anyone but he did point out that if you want to find the truest happiness, this is what you've got to do.

So it's through our conviction in his awakening that we follow this path with a purpose. We're clear about the purpose. The fact that we're clear about it allows us to let it go when we achieve it. Nibbana is the sort of thing that doesn't have to be held on to when it's attained. It's there. Unlike other things in life, it doesn't have to be maintained.

As Ajaan Lee once said, "Nibbana is easy. Everything else is hard." Of course, getting to nibbana isn't easy. It requires a path that you fabricate. The answer to that question, "How should you fabricate the present moment so that you can develop dispassion for the fabrications?" is: through fabricating the path. That's the hard part. But when you arrive, it's easy. It's the ultimate ease. And keeping that ultimate ease in mind while we're on the way to that attainment is an important part of appropriate attention: looking at everything from the perspective of, "How do I engage with this in such a way that I can find freedom?" That's the perspective you want to keep in mind to give yourself guidance as to how you fabricate the present moment right now.

So whether you're listening to a Dhamma talk or just focusing on your own breath, try to do it within the context of appropriate attention and you'll know what to do.