

Polishing the Mind

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The Buddha teaches that there are two sides to the path of every practice: the side of developing and the side of letting go. And it's important that you see the practice in both perspectives, that you have both sides in your practice. If you practice just letting go, you'll throw away the baby with the bath water. Everything good will get thrown out because you let go of everything and there is nothing left. On the other hand, if yours is just a practice of developing and working and doing, you miss the things that happen on their own, that happen when you do let go.

So an important part of the practice is realizing which is which. This is what discernment is all about, realizing which qualities in the mind are skillful, the ones that are your friends, and which qualities are unskillful, the ones that are your enemies. The ones that are your friends are the ones that help make your knowledge more clear, make you see things more clearly. Things like mindfulness, concentration and discernment and then the qualities that they depend on: virtue, morality, persistence. These are the good guys in the mind. These are the ones you have to nurture, the ones that you have to work at. If you don't work at them, they won't come on their own.

Some people think that practice is simply a matter of letting the mind go with its own flow, but the flow of the mind tends to flow down, just as water flows downhill, which is why the mind needs to be trained. In training the mind, we're not creating the unconditioned or unfabricated in the mind. It's more like polishing wood. The grain is already there in the wood, but unless you polish it, it doesn't shine. It isn't beautiful. If you want to see the beauty of the grain, you have to polish it, to work at it. You don't create the grain, but the polishing is what brings out the grain that's already there. If you don't polish it, it doesn't have the same shimmer, it doesn't have the same beauty as it does when it's polished.

So the practice is like polishing away at the mind to see what's of real value there within the mind. That's what the mindfulness, and the persistence and the ardency, and all the other terms that the Buddha uses that suggest effort and exertion: that's what they're for. This why we have rules in the practice—rules in terms of the precepts, rules for the monks to follow. They provide work for the mind, and it's good work. They're not just "make-work" rules. When you hold by the rules, you hold by the precepts, and as a result you find out an awful lot about the mind at the same time you're making life a lot easier for yourself and for the people around you. In the beginning it may seem harder to have the

rules to follow, but actually once you are living by them, they open up all kinds of possibilities that weren't there before, when everything was going in terms of the flow.

This is why there has to be effort. This why there has to be work in the practice. As the Buddha said, right effort has four sides. Abandoning is only one of the four. There's preventing: preventing unskillful things from arising. When unskillful things have arisen, those are the things that you abandon. Then there is giving rise to the skillful qualities, and finally maintaining them once they are there. You develop these skillful qualities and then you keep them going so that they develop to higher and higher levels. So sometimes it is useful when you are looking at your practice, to focus on exactly what is it that you are developing here— the good things like mindfulness and alertness. At other times it's helpful to focus on the things that you have to let go of, the things that you have to work at preventing.

You see right effort when you are doing concentration practice very easily because you have to focus on where you want the mind to be, to be aware of where you don't want it to be, and also to be ready to fight off anything that's going to come in disturb your stillness of mind. When you're focusing on your meditation topic, you pick it up and say that this what you are going to focus on for the next hour. By doing this you're giving rise to skillful qualities. And then you try to keep your focus there. You've got to keep reminding yourself that this is what you are doing here. You're not just sitting. You're sitting here so you can develop the mind. So you keep it on the topic you've chosen, like the breath, and then you work it bringing the mind back whenever it slips off— bringing it there, keeping it there, at the same time being aware that any moment the mind can slip off again. And this second level of awareness is what keeps you from drifting off obliviously and then coming back to the surface five minutes later, realizing that you were off who-know-where in the mean time. If you're prepared for the fact that the mind can leave at any point, then you can watch for it. In other words, you're watching both the breath and the mind, looking for the first sight that the it's going to leap off onto something else. This is a heightened level of awareness that allows you to see the subtle stirrings in the mind.

The mind is like an inchworm. The inchworm is at the edge of the leaf and even though its back feet may still be on this leaf, its front feet are up in the air, swaying around, searching around for another leaf to land on. If you're not careful, you're not aware of the fact that the mind is getting ready to move. For the inchworm, as soon as that other leaf comes--boomph, it's off. And so it is with the mind, when it latches onto something else and we're not aware of the fact that it's getting ready to leave the breath, it comes as a real surprise when you realize that you've slipped off someplace else. But when you have a sense

of when the mind is beginning to get a little bit antsy and ready to move, you can do something about it.

In other words you can't be complacent in the practice. Even if the mind seems to be staying with the breath, sometimes it's ready to move on and you've got to have that second level of awareness going as well so that you can be aware both of the breath and of the mind together— so that you have a sense of when the mind is snug with its object and when it's beginning to get a little bit loose. Then if you see it loosening up, do what you can to make it more snug. Is the breath uncomfortable? Could it be more comfortable? Could it be finer? Could it be longer, shorter whatever? Explore it. The mind is telling you on its own that it isn't happy there anymore— it wants to move.

So on the one hand, look at the quality of the breath and then turn around and look at the quality of the mind— this sense of boredom, this wanting to move. What's actually causing it? Sometimes it comes from the breath, and sometimes it's just a trait that arises in the mind— a trait that stirs up trouble. You want to be sensitive to what's going on, to see whether the problem is coming from the mind or the object the mind is focused on. If it's simply a sense of boredom that comes in, let it go by. You don't have to latch onto it. You don't have to identify with it, saying that it's *your* boredom. As soon as you identify with your boredom, the mind has left the breath and is on the boredom. Even though the breath may be there in the background, the boredom is what has come into the forefront. Your inchworm has moved off to the other leaf.

So if the mind is getting antsy and saying, "Well, move. Find something new," refuse for a while and see what happens. What is the strength lying behind that felt need to move? What's giving it power? Sometimes you'll find that it's actually a physical sensation someplace in the body that you've overlooked. Why don't you work on that one? Other times it's more an attitude— the attitude that you picked up someplace that said, "Just sitting here not thinking about anything is the most stupid thing you can do. You are not learning anything, you are not picking up anything new. Your mind isn't being exercised." And just remind yourself, "Where is that voice coming from?" It's coming from somebody who never meditated, who didn't understand all the good things that come from being still in the present moment.

Only when the mind is really still right here can it begin to resonate with the body. Then there's a resonance between the breath and the mind, a much greater sense of wholeness and oneness. So this is the positive aspect of the practice that you want to focus on. because if the mind is one place and the body is someplace else, there's no resonance. It's as if they were singing two completely different tunes. But if you get them together, it's like having one chord with lots of over-tones. And then you come to appreciate that when there is this sense of resonance

between the body and the mind, you begin to open up. You begin to see things in the mind, to see things in the body, that you didn't see before. It's healing for both the body and the mind. It's also eye-opening in the sense that the more subtle things that were there suddenly appear. Then you gain a sense of appreciation for this, that this is a very important thing to do with the mind. The mind needs this for its own sanity, for its own health.

So when the mind starts getting antsy and wants to move around and think about things and analyze things and it starts telling you that you're stupid to sit here and not think, remind it that not everything has to be thought through, not everything has to be analyzed. Some things have to be experienced directly. Because when you analyze things, where does the analysis come from? It comes mostly from your old ignorant way of thinking. And what we're doing as we get the mind to settle down is to put those ways of thinking and those ways of dividing up reality aside. For a state of concentration you want to get the mind together with the body and a sense of oneness, a sense of resonance between the two.

Once they've had chance to be together, *then* you can begin to see that things begin to separate out on their own. And this is a totally different way of separating. It's not the kind of separating that comes from ordinary thinking. It's actually seeing that even though the body and mind are resonating, they are two separate things, like two tuning forks. You strike one tuning fork, put another one next to it, and the this second tuning fork picks up the resonance from the first one, but they're two separate forks. Once they have had a chance to resonate for a while, you begin to see that they are two separate things. Knowing is different from the object of knowing. The body is the object, the mind is the knowing. And this way when they separate out, they don't separate out because you have some preconceived notion of how they should be— you watch it actually happening. It is a natural occurrence. It's like the grain of the wood, when you polish it all of a sudden the grain appears. Not because you designed the grain. It's the way it is. It's the way the wood has always been all along. It's just that you're giving yourself a chance to really see it for what it is instead of coming in with all your preconceived notions about how things get divided up, how things should be analyzed. There's a natural separation line between name and form, body and mind. They come together, but they're separate things, and when you learn how to see this, that's when real discernment comes in.

This is why the discernment that comes with concentration is a special kind of discernment. It's not your ordinary mode of thinking. It comes from giving things a chance to settle down. Like a chemical mixture: If everything gets jostled around, the two chemicals are always mixed together, and you can't tell that there are two in there. There seems to be just one mixture. But if you let it sit for a while

one of chemical will settle out. One will be lighter than the other and you'll see that there are actually two separate chemicals there. They separate themselves out on their own.

The same with the mind. A lot of these things begin to separate out on their own if you simply give the mind a chance to be still enough and you're watchful enough. If you're not watchful, the stillness drifts off into drowsiness. So you need the mindfulness as well as the stillness together for this to happen properly.

With the stillness you're letting go of a lot of nervous activity, you're letting go of a lot of unskillful things in the mind. But with the mindfulness you're developing the skillful qualities you need. This is how the letting go and the knowing coming together. When the Buddha talks about the four Noble Truths he talks about the duty appropriate to each. Your duty with regard to craving is to let it go. Then he says there is a third Noble Truth, which is the cessation of suffering. And what is that? It's the letting go of the craving at the same time that you are aware of what is happening. So it's a double process. There's knowing together with the letting go, and this makes all the difference in the world. Most of the time we let go of craving and we're not aware of what is happening so it's nothing special. It is just the ordinary way of life as we move from one craving to another. But when the mind has been still enough, the mindfulness is well-developed enough so that when that craving gets let go of— the craving gets abandoned— you're aware of it as well, and this opens up something new in the mind.

This is why the Noble Eight-fold Path is the path to cessation of suffering, because when we look at the factors of the path they fall into two types: the ones that develop and the ones that let go— they let go of all the unskillful nervous activity in the mind. The developing ones are the ones that develop insight, discernment, concentration, mindfulness, right effort. They all work at awareness, knowing clearly what is happening in the present moment.

So there are these two sides to the practice and you want to make sure that you've got both sides for your practice to be complete. It's not just a practice of relaxing and letting go, and it's not just a practice of staying up all night and meditating ten hours at a stretch, really pushing, pushing, pushing yourself. It's finding a balance between clear knowing and effort, a balance between developing and letting go, knowing which is which and how to get that balance just right. That's the skill of the practice. And when you have both sides of the practice perfectly balanced, they come together and are not a separation anymore. You've got the mind in a perfectly clear state where the knowing and the letting go become almost the same thing. The knowing and the letting go.

But the balance doesn't occur without practice. You may ask, "What are we practicing for?" Well, we're practicing

for the time when ultimately we can master these things. The practice gets balanced and then things really open up in the mind