

A Dependable Mind

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November 10, 1996

Our basic problem in life is that the most important thing in our lives is the thing we know the least about: our own minds. As the Buddha said, all things come out of the mind—all our experiences, all the happiness and all the pain we experience, come from the mind. “All things have the mind as their forerunner. Things are made of the mind, determined by the mind”—and yet we don’t know our minds, so our lives are out of control. We don’t understand where things come from or how things happen in our lives. That’s why we have to meditate—to get to know our own minds.

The difficulty in meditation is that you can’t focus directly on the mind. It’s like focusing on the wind up in a sky with no clouds—you have no way of knowing which direction it’s going because there’s nothing against which it’s going to make contact. That’s why you need a meditation object like the breath or “*buddho*” or parts of the body. Whichever object you find easy to settle down with, that’s the one you take. Having an object gives the mind something to bounce off of—because when you decide you’re going to stay with something, you begin to see how erratic the mind is. It keeps jumping around. It goes here a little while, then it goes there for a little while, and then over there. You begin to realize how this most important element in life—the mind—is so totally out of control, totally undependable. That’s why the mind needs training. We need to strap it down to one object and make it stay there so that we can really get to know it and train it until we sense that we can depend on it.

We talk about taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, but they can be our refuge only when we bring them into the mind. And the mind can be dependable only when we’ve got the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha in there: qualities like mindfulness, concentration, persistence, and dependability. So if you want to depend on the mind, make it something you *can* depend on.

The Buddha’s good news is that it’s possible to do this. At the time the Buddha was teaching, there were other teachers who said that there is nothing that you can do about the way life is, it’s all written in the stars. Others said that no matter what we do, any action leads to more suffering, so the only way to stop suffering is to stop acting. And still others said that life is totally chaotic, there’s no way you can make any sense out of it at all, so don’t try. Just try to have as much fun as you can while you can because everything falls apart at death. So there were all kinds of teachings, but they were all teachings lacking in hope. The Buddha’s teaching was the only one that offered any hope. He said, yes, there is a skill that you can develop in training the mind and, yes, it does lead to true happiness.

So just as with developing any skill, you have to be observant, stick with it, be sensitive to what you’re doing, be sensitive to the results, make necessary changes or adjustments and, as a result, you keep getting better and better and better at it. Sometimes the improvement is hard to see because it’s so

incremental. It takes such tiny, tiny steps, but you can rest assured that whatever positive energy you put into the practice is going to produce positive results. That's also part of the good news of the Buddha's teachings. Nothing good you do is wasted. No effort that you put into Right Effort is wasted.

So we have conviction in the Buddha's teaching because he teaches us to have conviction in ourselves—that the practice is something we *can* do. We don't have to depend on anything from the outside at all. Your own power, your own potential: That's what's going to get you where you want to go. If you have to depend on others, you don't really know if you can depend on them or not. Will they be there when you need them? They might change their minds. After all, you have no control over things outside of you.

Even though you currently may not have much control over the mind, you can still work at it and develop more and more control over time. Tell the mind to sit down and stay in one place often enough, and eventually it will stay. It's going to rebel for a while, but if you use your ingenuity in teaching it—showing it that in being obedient this way it won't always have to be struggling or suffering—it's going to find that it actually likes settling down. And then you can hardly keep it from settling down—it wants to keep coming back, coming back, coming back to the state of stillness, feeling at home in the present moment.

This is why we adjust the breath in the practice: to help the mind settle down easily. And we work to get to know the breath. What are the different ways it has of coming in? What are the different ways it has of going out? How does it affect the rest of the body?

When the breath comes in and out, it's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the energy that courses through the whole body, throughout every nerve. Think about the whole nervous system going down from the brain, down the backbone, out the arms, out the legs, encompassing all the parts of the body. Then allow yourself to think that the entire system can be affected by the breath if you let it happen. Let the whole body relax and get into the breathing. Let your mind get into the breathing. Don't think of yourself as being outside someplace looking at the breath. Be immersed in the process of breathing. The whole body breathes in. The whole body breathes out. And you're right in there with it.

After you work at this for a while, you begin to find that the work pays off. It really feels good, feels gratifying, just to sit here breathing. The mind has a sense of being at home. If the mind were to go out to think of other things, you'd be sending it out into a territory it totally has to create for itself. But you don't have to create much right here in the present moment. When you're really with the breath, you're putting much less of a strain on the mind. And when the mind gets used to this, it decides that it really likes it. Until it decides that it likes it, you have to use both the carrot and the stick. The carrot is the comfortable sensation of breathing; the stick is the constant reminder of what's going to happen if the mind doesn't come under control, if it isn't willing to settle down— all the suffering and pain that you'll have to endure.

The Buddha said that when people suffer, when there's pain in life, they have two kinds of reactions. One is bewilderment because they don't know where the pain comes from or why it's happening. The second reaction is the desire to get free of the pain one way or another. And these two reactions go hand in hand. You're bewildered at the same time that you're trying to get free, and so you tend

to do all kinds of unskillful things to get away from the pain, things that aren't helpful at all. But through practice you come to realize that the pain in the body isn't the culprit. The pain in the mind—the mental anguish, the mental distress: That's the real problem. When you really get to know the mind you see that the pain in the body isn't such a big deal at all. It becomes a problem only when the mind takes it on and converts it into mental pain, but to understand mental pain you have to work with physical pain.

So after the mind has settled down, focus it on the pain: pain in the legs, pain in the back, whatever. Just get to know it as it's actually present. What is this pain? Is it what you think it is? Try to see the pain on its own—simply as a sensation, and not as a “pain”—without all the presuppositions you may have about it: that it's placed right here, that it has this shape, that it's taken over the body, or whatever crazy notion the mind has about the pain.

When you think about it, most of the notions you've developed about pain were developed when you were really small, because that's when you first met up with pain. The first thing they do when you're born is to spank you so you can breathe. And even before they spank you, going through the process of birth is enough to make you pass out. So we've been dealing with pain ever since we were small, and for most of us the strategies we've been using are those we picked up when we were so small that we didn't know what was going on. A lot of those strategies are still there in your mind.

So just sit down and get to know the pain. Simply regarding the pain as something you want to know changes a lot of your subconscious attitudes toward it right there. Your usual attitude is that once there's pain, you want to get rid of it, to get away from it. Of course, if you keep running away from it you're never going to get to know it, you'll never get to understand it, and this means that you'll end up dealing with pain more and more out of bewilderment. So once the mind has settled down in the sense of wellbeing fostered by the breath, tell yourself that it's time to get to know the pain, make friends with the pain—not so you can live with pain forever, but so you can really understand how far the pain goes and how far the mind goes and where the two are actually separate. Be sure that your purpose is to get to know the pain, not so much to make it go away, but to thoroughly understand it. The understanding is what will enable you to get beyond it in ways you didn't expect: The mind can be with the pain and yet not be pained by it.

This is an important skill to develop because as long as there's a body, there's going to be pain. The question is not how to run away from it, but how to live with it so as not to be pained by it. Realize that the pain is simply happening, not necessarily happening to *you*. It's just happening. It's an event. It has no intention to harm you at all. You feel pained by it because you put yourself in the way by laying claim to the part of the body where the pain seems to be. It's like getting into the line of fire: You're bound to get shot. So don't get into the line of fire. Don't lay any claim to it. See that the pain is just something that's there, and that it's going to come and it's going to go in line with its own causes and effects.

Your only duty is to watch it, to see what it's really like for there to be pain. Simply be there with the pure sensation in the moment. How does it move around? How does it change? Exactly what about it is painful? What's the mind doing to the pain when the mind labels it? What effect does that have? If you can

catch that event in the mind—the mind saying, “This is this and that is that; this is the pain and it’s doing this,” and all of the other running commentary that the mind makes on the present moment—then you begin to realize this in itself is a lot of the problem right there. The fear that the pain is going to stay; the anticipation that it’s going to stay; all these thoughts: Just let them drop away. See what happens. Where does the pain go when they drop away? By watching this your whole attitude toward the pain changes, because you come to see that it isn’t at all what you thought it was.

And at the same time you learn an awful lot about your mind—all the things that the mind comes in and says about the pain. It’s as if you have a whole committee offering their suggestions and opinions. So this is a very good way of getting to know the mind because a lot of things buried in the mind will tend to surface and focus on what’s happening when there’s pain. Instead of trying to run away from the pain, you just sit with it and see what kind of reaction comes up in the mind. Again, don’t identify with the reactions. The reactions will say, “Stop, stop, stop.” Or they’ll say, “This is this and that’s that and you should do this and you should do that.” Just respond, “No, I’m just going to be here. I’m just going to watch.” And watch both the pain and the mind’s reactions to the pain.

This is how you really get to know the mind while training it to become more and more dependable. If the mind isn’t shaken by pain, there’s very little that’s going to shake it. If it doesn’t fear pain, there’s very little for it to fear. And when it’s not afraid in the face of pain, it becomes a mind you can depend on. When you want it to work, it will work for you. When you want it to rest, it will rest. When you want it to think, it can think—and it will think clearly. When the time comes for it to stop thinking, it will stop.

We’ve spent so much of our lives developing fear of pain, fear of suffering. If you can get past that fear, get past the mind’s tendency to be pushed around by these things, you’ve got a mind you can rely on. As when they train soldiers: They have to put the soldiers through all kinds of hell in order to know which ones they can depend on and which ones they can’t. The ones who come through it okay: Those are the ones you know you can depend on. It’s the same with the mind. If you’re afraid to face up to pain, the mind will never have any control over itself at all. It will never become something you really can depend on. It will always flinch under the pain, unwilling to do this, unwilling to do that, because it’s afraid. And when that’s what your mind is like, where are you going to find anything to depend on? Where are your true friends at that point? Even your own mind isn’t a friend.

So when the mind has settled down and really feels at home in the present moment, working with pain is an excellent way of training it. Through this you can come to see that the mind will obey you not only when you make it comfortable, but also when you test it, when you give it work to do. That’s when you have a mind you can really take as your refuge.