

Doing Meditation

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One of the Buddha's major insights is that the mind spends its time doing. We're always doing something: thinking about this, getting the body to move and do that, getting your mouth to move to say those things. There's always a doing, there's always a choice going on in the mind.

This is what lies at the essence of karma: the choices, the intentions we have. Sometimes it's simply the choice to focus on one thing rather than another. Other times, it goes further than that: coming up with perceptions, coming up with ideas, coming up with plans, deciding to do something. There's always activity going on in the mind.

It's no wonder we feel such a lack of peace in our lives, because the mind is constantly coming up with things to do. Even when things are peaceful, after a while the mind says, "This is getting boring. Let's try something else."

So the trick is to learn how to take this doing of the mind and turn it to our advantage, so that we can bring the mind to a point of equilibrium where it doesn't have to do things anymore. But to get to that point of equilibrium requires a doing, based on the realization that we can change the way we act, we can change the way we do things.

Look at the practice. We talk about practicing concentration, developing discernment. In English, these things are nouns. In Pali they have nouns for them, too, but they also have corresponding verbs, which is one of the reasons why I prefer to translate *paññā* as discernment rather than wisdom. In English we don't have a verb for "wising," but we do have a verb for discerning.

So remind yourself that while you're meditating, you are doing something. There's an activity of fabrication going on. You're creating the path, putting the path together. The discernment comes in learning how to do it more and more skillfully, with more and more precision, more and more finesse. And that comes from observing.

Sometimes we hear that meditation means that you stop doing and just simply "be the knowing" or "be with" things. Well, being is a doing as well. When you identify with something, identify with a particular faculty, that's an action, that's a choice that you make, that's a doing as well. And there are some times when simply watching—which is what they're actually talking about—is the most skillful thing you can do in your meditation. Other times, though, you have to make more of an effort. There's more of a process of putting things together.

So, as you're meditating, try to be very conscious of the fact that you are doing something right now. Right now you're focusing on the breath. In the beginning, that requires a lot of repeated reminders to yourself: keep focusing on the breath, keep focusing on the breath. But you often find that simply reminding yourself to do that is not enough. More is required.

Use your ingenuity in figuring out ways to make the breath more interesting, more comfortable, a more pleasant place to focus, a more pleasant place to be. That serves two functions. On the one hand, it does make it easier to stay in the present moment: The more pleasant the sensation in the body is, then the nicer it is to stay here, the easier it is to stay here, the more inviting it is.

On the other hand, you learn things: You begin to realize that the breath is not just the sensation of the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the whole energy flow in the body that corresponds with the in-and-out of the air. If you pay careful attention to the different parts of the body, you see that there are some parts that you tend to tense up as you breathe in, and other parts where you hold on to tension even as you breathe out. You can change that. You don't have to tense up to breathe in; you don't have to hold on to tension or push things out when the breath goes out. Just allow it to go out on its own.

You can make a scan through the body as you breathe in and out. If you find tension in any part of the body associated either with the in-breath or the out-breath, you can let it go. Start from the head, go down the back, out the legs, then down the front of the body, then down the shoulders and out the arms. Or you can start at the navel and work up the body from the front—whatever you find most convenient and most helpful in getting the breath to be more and more comfortable.

As you do this, you can't help but notice the relationship between the mind and the breath. Sometimes a pattern of tension in the body corresponds to a part of the mind that has something closed off. When you open up that part of the body, you find things that you've forgotten a long time ago suddenly appearing in the mind. Well, just let them appear and let them go. You don't have to focus on them. But it does give you an insight into the connections between the mind and the body.

Sometimes you notice when a thought appears. When you're conscious of the whole body like this, you'll also notice that there's a pattern of tension that corresponds to the thought appearing in your sense of the body. If you try relaxing that pattern of tension, the thought goes away. That provides you with another interesting insight into the connection between mind and body.

One of the basic principles in the psychology of learning is that if a person

doesn't *do* anything, he or she doesn't have the opportunity to learn anything. It's through the doing that we learn. You notice if you do this, you get that result; if you do that, you get this result. You begin to notice what happens if you change what you do. That makes your knowledge of cause and effect even more precise.

So it's in working with the breath like this that you have the opportunity to gain insight. People sometimes wonder, "How can concentration lead to insight?" It's by constantly reminding yourself that this is a process of doing. As you're doing and as you check the results that correspond to what you did, you learn. You change what you do, you see what happens. Sometimes things will stay the same; other times they'll change. That gives you a lesson in cause and effect as well.

So the insight comes in being more and more sensitive as you do the practice. The sensitivity allows you to see things you didn't see before. You learn to discern things you didn't discern before.

And it's not a question of storing away little insights like a squirrel storing away nuts. It's a question of maintaining the sensitivity that allows the insights to come as you need them.

Ajaan Fuang once said that when insights come in meditation not to write them down, not to try to memorize them. He said, "If they're really genuine insights, you won't forget them." If you tried to memorize them, you'd be cluttering up your mind with all sorts of past insights, things that were useful at one point in the past but may not necessarily be useful in the future.

But if you develop this quality of sensitivity, this quality of openness throughout the body and mind, then when a particular issue comes up that's similar to one that you've dealt with before, the insight that helped you the last time around will come again as well.

So insight is not an issue of memorizing past insights. Instead, it's an issue of maintaining the qualities that'll keep producing the insights as you need them. That, too, is a doing: the concentrating of the mind, the stilling of the mind, the opening up of this sense of the breath in the body. These actions create the conditions for insights to arise.

So understand this point that meditation is a doing. Even when things are very still in the mind, there's still a level of doing there.

In one of the texts where the Buddha talks about formless states of absorption—which are very refined states of concentration where things seem extremely still—the insight comes in seeing that there is a choice, there's a doing. You take your equanimity and you apply it to a particular topic, apply it to a particular notion: a sense of space, boundless space, or a sense of boundless consciousness. When you see the act of putting it there and keeping it there, you realize that even these very

refined, very still, very spacious states are things that are put together. That's when you lose your interest in them because you see that they're inconstant, stressful, not-self.

This is where the teachings on the three characteristics have their role: They're applied to the doing. We're looking for true happiness, and they're our test, like a touchstone. In the past they used a touchstone to test gold. Well, in your meditation, the three characteristics are your touchstone. Have you arrived at the end of the meditation? Have you arrived at true happiness? Check to see if there's any element of inconstancy, stress, or not-self in that happiness, in that sense of ease, in that sense of well-being. If there is, then there's more work to be done.

Finally, though, through action you reach a point where everything reaches equilibrium in the mind. You realize you can't do anything at all. If you do anything, it turns into a state of becoming: more inconstancy, more stress, more not-selfness. And at that point, you gain an insight in how not to do anything, how even not to make a choice. That opens up the mind to something totally without action.

So the paradox here is that you use action in order to get to that state of non-action. You can get there by your being really observant about what you're doing and the results of your actions. That's what takes you there. The insights you've memorized from the past don't take you there. It's the sensitivity you maintain at all times: That's the quality that turns your ordinary doing into something special—skillful doing, doing that leads to the end of doing.

It's possible. Just because it's paradoxical doesn't mean that it's impossible. It just means that it's difficult and it requires all-around powers of observation. But those are qualities that can be developed.

Those are things you can do.