

Self-Reliance

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The Buddha once said that his practice, after lots of trial and error, finally got on the right track when he learned to divide his thinking into two sorts: skillful and unskillful in terms of the results it gave. In other words, it wasn't a matter of having a lot of clever theories or ideas, it was just seeing what happens as a result of holding certain thoughts, keeping certain thoughts in mind. Some thinking, he discovered, led to harm; other thinking led to no harm. After a lot of observation, he detected that the difference was based on the motivation. If there was any sensual passion, any ill will, any harmfulness underlying the thinking, that thinking was going to be unskillful no matter how much it might seem right or correct on the surface. If these motivations were lying behind it, then the thinking would lead to harm. As for thinking which lack those qualities—thinking imbued with renunciation, no ill will, no harmfulness—that led to no harm at all.

Sounds pretty simple, makes a lot of sense, but it's not that easy to put into practice. One, it requires stepping back from your thoughts and watching them. Not only that, it also requires stepping back from your motivation and watching that, too. That's an area where we tend to have strong sense of identification. But without the ability to step back, you can't really see anything, can't understand what's going on.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate, focusing on the breath. That gives you a place to step back. When you're with the breath, you're outside of all the words flying around in your head. If you can establish this as a good solid basis, you're less likely to get sucked in by the more seductive ideas.

So focus on your breath. As for the thoughts that come in and out of your head, let them come in and out simply as events. You don't have to pay any attention to their meaning, don't have to get involved with them. Just give as much attention as you can to the breathing. This way, you're giving less food to those thoughts. Sometimes even paying attention to the thoughts to the extent of wanting to blot them out: That feeds them. So here you're starving them.

It doesn't matter if they starve. They don't hurt when they starve. They're just formations, coming in and out of the mind, coming into shape, then dissolving, coming into shape in another shape, and then dissolving. So just allow that process to happen on its own without your having to get involved. Your responsibility right now is simply to be with the breath, that's all. Try to be as

continuously with the breath as possible, because you'll find certain things tend to knock you off.

In the beginning, all you have to do is realize you've been knocked off the breath and then get back to it. After a while, you begin to get a sense of what kinds of things knock you off, and how you can anticipate and withstand their impact. But in the beginning, it's simply a matter of learning to reestablish mindfulness, reestablish mindfulness.

In order to stay established, there also has to be a sense of well-being: It feels good to be here with the breath. You can play with the breath in any way you want until you get that sense of well-being. How do you know it's a good breath? It's up to you to decide. You're developing your powers of judgment here.

The word "judgment" has a bad connotation in society right now. It sounds too close to the word "judgmental," but actually it's a different quality. You might think of the difference between judgmental and being judicious. Being judicious is a good thing, and having good powers of judgment means you know when to make choices, when to make value judgments, and when to wait and watch. The whole problem with being judgmental is that you make a decision based on poor evidence or on bad motivation. But being judicious means that you're actually making wise choices.

This is a faculty you want to develop, because without this, meditation simply becomes something that someone else tells you to do and you follow the instructions like a good little boy or a good little girl, hoping that somehow it'll all work out on its own, and that the people who are teaching know what they're talking about. But that's not nearly as reliable as learning to develop your own powers of judgment.

In the beginning, you start with simple things. Does this breath feel good? Well, it feels okay. How about changing it here? What will that do? Watch it for a while. You may be not too sure yet, but follow it for a while and see. Be willing to observe. Be willing to experiment. Stick with it for a while and see what happens. If the results start getting unpleasant, then you can change. There's always room for experimentation, there's always room for changing your tactics here. Over time, you develop a more and more intuitive sense of how much adjusting the breath needs, when it's just right, how much adjusting is too much, how much adjusting is too little, what you need to do in order to adjust. Sometimes it's simply a matter of changing your concept of the breath, and the breath will change. You can play with that for a while, see how your perceptions shape the breath. Start questioning your assumptions.

Sometimes we feel that we have to pull the breath in. Well, do you really have to pull it in? Can't it just come in on its own? After all, the body is alive. It's going to do its breathing on its own. You don't have to get involved, pulling it like taffy. Exactly what would be doing the pulling and where would it be pulling from?

This is called de-perception—playing with your perceptions, trying to question them. You learn a lot of interesting lessons in this way about the impact of your thoughts on your physical processes, at the same time learning what kind of perception results in a sense of breathing that feels really good, where you feel that it's nourishing to breathe, it's not a burden to breathe. When the breath comes in, it gives energy to the body. When it goes out, it doesn't drain energy away. That's the kind of breathing you want.

As you do this, you develop your own powers of judgment so that they're sharper. You get clear about what you're doing, clear about the results of what you're doing, seeing that sometimes you can sense the results immediately, other times it takes longer. This is an important principle. Right here is the totality of the Buddha's teachings on causal relationships. Some results come right away; other results take longer. Simple enough idea, but if you were to try to work out all of the ramifications of one or actions in your life, you'd go crazy. The principle of kamma can get very complex, but it comes out of this basic observation that some results come right away, other results take time.

So as you learn to be judicious, learn how to use your powers of judgment, you get a better and better sense of which things you can pass judgment on immediately, which other things take time, which other things require patience.

Once you develop this ability with your breathing, you can start turning around to look at your own mind, watching the thoughts as they come and go, and getting a sense of the quality of the motivation behind the thought. Sometimes you can see immediately that a certain thought is not one you want to follow. If there's any greed, anger, or delusion—passion, aversion, harmfulness, ill will, any of these things—then once you know how to sense that, you can know right away: This is not a thought you want to follow. You'd better drop it. Other times, it takes time to watch. After all, you're learning about a person here. Even though you may think it's yourself, it's not necessarily so.

It's the same as when you want to develop a friendship: It takes time. You have to be observant, you have to take time to get to know the other person. Your own mind requires a lot of time because, more than anything else, we tend to hide our motivations from ourselves. So here we're unlearning that habit, at the same time learning how to open things up judiciously in the mind.

You find that you make mistakes, but that's how you learn. People who are unwilling to risk mistakes never learn anything. All they know is what they learn from other people and it stops right there. They're afraid to experiment. That, of course, means that they have to totally trust those other people—and there's always the possibility that those other people are wrong.

So this way you learn how to develop your own powers of judgment. You get judicious in how to judge. If you can develop this much from the meditation, you've developed a lot right there, because this is the factor of meditation that allows you to be more and more independent, teaches you how to rely on yourself more, to see through your own self-deceptions. You're developing the faculty of the mind that turns discernment or wisdom into something that really is yours. Otherwise, it's just something you've heard from other people, or something you've thought through. But when you put things to the test like this and learn to judge the results, that's when your insights really become genuine. You've seen for yourself that certain things are skillful, certain things are not.

So the Buddha's tactic in training us is not to spoon-feed us the truth. It's to teach us how to feed ourselves—how to learn, how to experiment, how to evaluate the results of our experiments, how to try new approaches when things don't work, and how to develop the good things when they *do* work. It's the meditation equivalent of teaching someone how to fish instead of just giving them a fish.

What was that line: "If you give somebody a beer, you got them drunk once, but if you teach them how to brew, you got them drunk for their whole lives"? Well, this is the good side of that: Teach people how to judge the results of their breathing, judge the results of their thinking, and you've got independent meditators, meditators who can learn how to rely on themselves.

This is a lot of the teaching technique in the Thai forest tradition. When I was with Ajaan Fuang, one of my duties was to look after his hut, clean up, boil the water for his tea, wash his robes. If I was doing anything wrong, he'd let me know, in no uncertain terms. But then he wouldn't tell me how to do things right. That was for me to observe.

Then I read in Ajaan Lee's autobiography that that was precisely the way Ajaan Mun had taught him. The purpose of all this is to teach you to be observant. If you don't know, well, experiment. Try something out. If it doesn't work out, you know. You've learned. If you try to go through life always being right already, then you never learn anything. The type of people who can't take criticism—or who are not willing to have their mistakes pointed out to them—never learn. The type of people who want everything explained beforehand never learn, either. It's the people who are willing to take risks, learn from their mistakes, learn from when

they don't make mistakes: Those are the ones who develop the talents they really need as meditators.

After all, when things come up in the meditation, there won't always be somebody there holding your hand. But if you've learned how to learn, learned how to observe, learned how to experiment, learned how to evaluate the results of your actions, then you've got what you need. You've opened up all kinds of possibilities for yourself that are not limited simply by what you've heard or what you've read. You can explore the process of action as it's playing itself out in your life right here, right now.

As the Buddha said, there are four kinds of actions in the world: those that give pleasing results on the conventional level, those that give unpleasant results on the conventional level, those that give mixed results on the conventional level, and those that take you out and lead to the end of action. He found that fourth type by experimenting. We have the advantage of knowing through someone who ran the experiment and found the way out. But in order to find it for ourselves, we have to be willing to follow his experimental method. We start by a very simple process, as we're doing right here, right now: working with the breath, evaluating the breath, seeing what works, seeing what doesn't. Everything else builds from here.