

Exploring What You've Got

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There's a verse in the Pali Canon that says, "My hut is well-protected, my roof is well-thatched. So, rain: Go ahead and rain as much as you like!"

Of course, that's symbolic. When the mind is well-protected, then no matter what happens outside, it doesn't penetrate.

What we're doing as we're meditating here is to find that protection. And basically it's for protection of what we've already got.

The message of the world is that you need to go out and buy this and get that and find this and find that. You're lacking. But the message of the Dhamma is, "Look at what you've already got and make the best use of that."

What have you got sitting here right here, right now? You've got the body and the mind. That's all you need: the body sitting here breathing, the mind thinking and aware. You put all those things together so they develop.

It's like having a seed and some water and some earth and some sunlight. If you keep them separate, the seed doesn't really develop. When you put them together, then the seed can grow.

So, think about the breath and be aware of the breath. And then be aware of the next breath and then the next and then the next. Just keep at it. As you stay here, your awareness of the breath will get more refined.

You see more clearly what you've got right here, what potentials there are, both in term of physical potentials—what the breath can do for you, what the breath energy really is in the body—and in terms of mental potentials. What can mindfulness do for you, this act of keeping something in mind? What can alertness do for you, the act of simply being aware of the present moment?

We're here to explore this, to explore what we've got.

All too often, we think that meditation is about sitting here until something we don't already have comes along. In fact, I actually heard someone once describe their idea of meditation as, "sitting and waiting for an accident to happen," a sudden opening up that couldn't be explained.

But that's not really what it's about. It's learning to see what you've got here, more and more precisely, more and more fully. So instead of sitting here waiting for something strange to happen, focus on what you've already got.

This is one of the problems with reading a lot about meditation before you meditate. No matter how correct the descriptions are, we all come to the meditation out of ignorance and so we're apt to misinterpret what we hear.

This doesn't mean that reading about meditation or learning about it is futile. If teachers remained totally silent, we'd really be up the creek without a paddle. But you have to keep in mind that often the teacher's coming from a position where either he or she has had particular experiences and so tends to emphasize those. Or in the course of teaching, the teacher's found out that particular things tend to cause a lot of trouble.

For instance, we all read about how in meditation there are signs and visions: getting lights and seeing visions here and there. Those are among the biggest obstacles in the path. Yet they're also part of the meditation most people seem to look forward to most: When are you going to get the vision? When are you going to get the lights?

But that's not what it's all about. Some people have them: That's part of what they've already got, the potential is already there in their mind. But when that potential gets activated, it's dangerous. You can really get carried away by the things you see, taking them either as a sign that you've got some special knowledge or that you're a special person. Sometimes the knowledge is true, which makes it even more dangerous. You tend to stop checking it to see exactly how true or how trustworthy it is.

So this is one of the reasons why a lot of meditation manuals spend so much time on visions and signs: because they're dangerous.

Of course, people who are meditating and not gaining visions and signs tend to think there's something wrong with their meditation, that they're not getting anywhere. What's causing them not to get anywhere is that they're looking for the wrong things—they're looking for things that aren't there. You have to look at what you've already got. You've got the breath coming in, going out. You've got the body sitting here. You've got the mind thinking, and you've got the mind aware. You just explore those things.

Again, the word "explore" is important. Try to think of meditation instructions not so much as a map to what you're going to have to see but as a series of questions.

Look at the Buddha's analysis of suffering, dependent co-arising. We're all starting out of ignorance. From ignorance we create ideas about things: This should be that way, that should be this way—and so on up through the cycle. The important point that's going to make a big difference, though, is when you get to the factor called "name and form." "Name" stands for mental activities; "form" stands for the body or your sense of the body sitting right here.

And in those mental activities there's one that's especially important: It's called "attention." Attention means basically what you choose to focus on, what

questions you choose to ask yourself.

So the purpose of meditation instructions is to get you to ask the right questions. It's in asking the questions that you can begin to pry loose your ignorant ideas, the ones that cause suffering.

So always come to the meditation with a questioning attitude: What's this? What can be made of this? What can be done with this?

For example, the breath: What can be done with the breath? You can breathe in; you can breathe out. You can breathe long; you can breathe short. Fast/slow. Heavy/light. In an uncomfortable way or in a comfortable way. So, explore your breathing. It's best to avoid uncomfortable breaths. If you're stuck in them, try to figure out ways to make them more comfortable.

That way, you give the mind an easier place to settle down, a friendlier place to settle down. That makes it easier to stay in the present moment, easier to stay with what you've got right here, right now, so that you don't lose focus and go running off after ideas about things that you don't have right here, right now.

In asking questions, you use your imagination. See what questions get good results. You might question: "How do you know when a breath is too long? How do you know when a breath is too short?" Well, experiment. When the breath comes in, what brings it in? Is it something you have to do or does the nature of the breath energy in the body do it for you? Are you getting in the way of the body doing it for you? How would you get out of the way? Explore that. That's something you can learn right here simply through the process of breathing, watching it. Watching how you relate to the breathing.

In this way, you can question your way into concentration. Learn how to ask the questions that give the mind a better place to settle down, that help it to settle down. As you take the various potentials that are here in the present moment—potentials in terms of the qualities of the body in terms of heaviness or lightness, warmth or coolness—there are things you can focus on.

Like right now it may feel a little cool because of that rainstorm going on outside. Well, do you have any warm sensations in the body? Where are they right now? Focus on them and think of the warmth spreading from those sensations. Don't focus on the cool sensations. You'll find that that changes your experience of the present moment.

If you're feeling heavy and listless, think of the energy that's flowing through the body. There's an element of energy in every sensation that makes up your sense of the body. So ferret out that sense of energy and allow it to flow. See what directions it flows.

Sometimes when you open things up a little bit, it starts flowing in the wrong

directions. If it flows up too much, you may get a headache. So try to be as systematic in going through the whole body and allowing as much as possible of the breath energy to flow all together.

That not only helps balance your sense of the body but also opens up your awareness so that it becomes a broader awareness. We want the mind to be centered but we also want to have a sense of awareness that's broad and doesn't feel constricted. The less sense of constriction you have, the easier it is to stay here.

So these are things you can work with, potentials you have right here, right now. Progress in the meditation means exploring them and getting more familiar with them. You're more and more at home being in the present moment. You're more and more skilled in dealing with the breath.

Then, as your concentration develops, you can start asking other questions as well. That whole series of questions the Buddha teaches on inconstancy, stress, not-self: The first time he introduced those concepts, he introduced them as questions. "Is the body constant or inconstant?" Well, look and see. How can you tell? The steadier your gaze, the more inconstancy you can see.

Try to make your gaze steady so that you can see the movement of things. In fact, that's one of the frameworks for these questions: that you try to keep your gaze as steady as possible until you watch everything with a steady gaze. Then you turn around and you look at the gaze itself to see exactly how steady it is.

But don't short-circuit the process too fast. In other words, don't give up on concentration and say, "Well I've learned concentration, it's inconstant. Yep, my concentration is pretty poor, it's pretty inconstant." That's not learning the lesson the Buddha wants you to learn. Actually he wants you to question that. Exactly how constant can you make your concentration?

He often talks of being constant in your practice. *Niccāṃ kayagatasati*: "mindfulness constantly immersed in the body." Don't be too quick to label things as inconstant.

In making your awareness and your mindfulness constant, you also give rise to a sense of ease, *sukha*, which is the opposite of *dukkha*. Again, it seems to be working at cross-purposes with the three characteristics, but you're doing it as part of a strategy. The greater sense of ease you have in the present moment, the more delight you take in being here. The more constantly you can be here, the more you really learn about the mind.

So don't destroy your tools before they've done their job.

This, too, is a problem that comes from reading about meditation and misunderstanding what the teachings are trying to say, where they apply. The safe way to approach them is, as I said, trying to look at what you've got right here,

right now, and ask the questions that make it clear what you've got here right now—questions that make it easier for the mind to settle down, questions that make it easier for you to let go of things that are causing you suffering, that are disturbing that stillness, that sense of ease, that sense of constancy in the mind.

You know when you're asking the right questions because they help you see, they help get the mind still, make things clear. If you're asking the wrong questions, then no matter how much effort you put into the practice, you keep heading off in the wrong direction.

So this factor of appropriate attention is very important.

We all come to the practice with ignorant ideas. It's like that line from Tolstoy that "happy families are all alike, but unhappy families are all unhappy in their own ways." The understanding of awakened people is all alike. The understandings of unawakened people are confused and ignorant, each in their own way.

This is why it's so difficult to write *the* authoritative guide to meditation. Everyone who comes to read it is going to misunderstand it in different ways. But how are you going to get past your own misunderstandings? Through learning how to ask the right questions, questions that bring the mind into the present moment, help you see more clearly what you have right here, right now, that help you see how ordinarily you create suffering out of what you have right here, right now—and how you can make what you've got right here, right now, into your path.

When you learn how to ask those questions: That's when your meditation is progressing.

You'll see the results not in signs, visions, and lights but in a greater sense of ease in being here right here, right now, a greater sense of familiarity, a greater sense of skill in what you make of the potentials that are here right here, right now.

So don't let yourself get waylaid by expectations that pull you away from what you've got right here, right now. If you do, they obscure what you've got right here, right now. Focus instead on the teachings that help focus you right here to see what you've got more and more clearly with each and every breath.