

## *Watch What You're Doing*

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When you meditate, you're both the teacher and the student. In other words, you tell yourself to focus on the breath in a certain way, to work with the breath a certain way, then you do it, and then you have to evaluate the results—one, to make sure you're doing things the way you tell yourself to do, and when the results don't come out, you have to figure out why. Sometimes it's an issue in the mind, sometimes it's an issue in the body, and you've got to figure which one it is.

What this means is that you have to be very observant, getting a clear sense of cause and effect. After all, the Buddha summarized his awakening in a causal principle: "When this is, that is. When this isn't, that isn't. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that." You learn by seeing the connections between what you do and the results you get. Sometimes the results are immediate, as when by mistake you slam a hammer down your hand: It's going to hurt right away. Other times, the results take a longer time, and it takes heightened powers of observation to see these long-term effects and to sort out which is the cause among many possibilities.

Ajaan Fuang, my teacher, once said that the one thing you have to believe in when you meditate is the principle of karma. In other words, your intentions do have effects, and the effects are commensurate with the intentions. As you're getting the mind still, it's not just a question of stress reduction or staying calm. You're trying to understand something. The something you're trying to understand is what you're doing and the results of what you're doing. The mind is doing things on a lot of levels. It's like a big switchboard in there. All kinds of signals are coming in from all the different nerves, and it's as if there are several different people at the switchboard, deciding which calls to answer and which ones just to leave. Lots of decisions are being made all the time, simply as you sit here. You may think you're sitting here just being still, but there's a lot of doing going on in the being still.

The reason we try to get the mind still is so that we can see more and more clearly exactly what's going on in the mind, what ideas are in charge, and then learning to watch to see what the effects are, learning to make the connections. Some of the lessons come very early on in the meditation. You make up your mind to stay with the breath, and it wanders right off. You learn how to catch it. The next time it wanders off, you may be able to catch it a little more quickly.

Ultimately, you want to be able to see it as it's about to go, as you see the stages as the mind pries itself loose from its intention to stay with the breath and is off someplace else. We have a tendency to hide those stages from ourselves. It's almost as if you turn off the lights inside the mind and then, when you turn them on, all the furniture's been rearranged. Yet someplace in there, there will be the memory that you're supposed to be someplace else, back with the breath. One of the skills of meditation is learning how to get back to the breath right away, how to extricate yourself as quickly as possible, no matter how fascinating or entangling that particular distraction was. You have to be able to just stop and get out.

I have a friend who was telling me that there's a question you can ask different people. The question is this: You're dreaming that you're in a boat out in the middle of the ocean with your parents and family members, and there's not enough food in the boat for everyone to survive. The question is: What are you going to do? How are you going to choose which person is going to die? How are you going to extricate yourself in that situation? My friend said that if you ask the question of an adult, they give all kinds of rationalizations for why you would choose one parent over the other, or yourself over everybody else. You ask the question of a child, though, and the child would say, "Well, wake up. After all it's just a dream."

Somehow as we grow up, we tend to lose that ability to pull ourselves out of a mental state, to realize that it's just a mental state and that we can drop it. We have no responsibilities to it. Then get back to the breath. Watch more and more carefully for the next time the mind is about to slip off. Look for the steps, so that you can see exactly where mindfulness lapses, and then immediately stitch it all back together again. You begin to see that the mind's wandering off does have an intentional aspect.

You learn similar lessons even as the mind gets more and more still. You get into a good state of concentration and you begin to see, after you've been there for quite a while, that this concentration seems so still and so basic and so elemental, but it really does require lots of different decisions being made to keep it going. Again, it's a matter of learning to detect what you're doing and what the results of what you're doing are.

So this is a lesson that's always in the background. There are times when you put that lesson aside so you that can focus more and more just on staying with a particular state, to check it out to see how a useful it might be. But there are also times when you want to take the whole thing apart to see exactly what element of intention is there, and the element of stress that goes along with the intention. It's seeing through this that awakening can happen. There's a very clear connection

between what you're doing, how you're dropping the element of intention, and how that functions as you finally let go of the very last intention, because so many times one intention simply drops because another one takes its place. Even the intention to drop something: That is an intention. There comes a moment in the meditation when you realize that any intention in any direction is going to create suffering, and the only alternative is not to intend, which is something we're not very good at. But if you get very sensitive to what happens in the mind, what actions are going on, what intentions are constantly being relayed back and forth, then you're more and more likely to see where the possibility for no intention lies. That's how you get out of the system: the system of conditionality, the system of suffering and stress.

What that requires is a very clear ability to see what you're doing. When the Buddha talks about ignorance, it's precisely ignorance of this: We do things but we don't see what we're doing. That's why we suffer. So, at the very least, when you're meditating, if things don't settle down the way you'd like them to, just keep watch of what you're doing and learn from that. The Buddha's instructions basically are instructions on how to learn, how to be your own teacher and your own student all at once, as you watch what you're doing. It's something you really should be an expert in, but because we haven't learned how to learn, we don't notice. This is the opportunity to learn that lesson, and to reap the benefits that come from learning it.