

Using What You've Got

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One of the basic principles of the practice is that you've make use of what you've got. The raw materials of the practice are things right here, right now. You've got the body, you've got feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, and consciousness. For the most part, we tend to carry these things around like baggage. The trick is to convert them into the path.

So what have we got? We've got the breath: That's the main factor in the body, so focus on that. Then you notice that there are feelings that go along with the breath. Sometimes the breath is comfortable, sometimes it's not. Because it's easier to stay with comfortable sensations, let's try to keep the breath comfortable. You get a sense of what's just right for the breath: when it's too long, when it's too short, how you can just think it back to just right. The more sensitive you get to that, the more you add to your set of tools.

What keeps you with the breath is the perception of "breath, breath, breath." Think of every cell in the body breathing. Tune in to that level of your awareness, because there are many things going on in the present moment, many levels of reality. You could sit here thinking of yourself as a tiny speck in the vast cosmos: That's one level of reality. Or you could think about the chemical elements that make up your body: That's another level of reality. You could think about whether your body is appealing to other people or whether it's appealing to yourself: That's another level of reality. The question is: Are those levels of reality useful for putting an end to suffering? No. So you place the label just on "breath," and think of everything as being related to breath energy, a sense of energy flow throughout the body. Just tune in to that level of reality.

Then you'll notice that perception is what keeps you tuned in. And what keeps that perception going? There's an element of will, embodies in two types of activities. The first is directed thought. You keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath, stay with the breath. The second is that you adjust the breath. That's called evaluation. You adjust it and see how it feels. Does it feel right yet? If not, you can change. When it does feel right, think of the comfortable sensation spreading out. You don't have to push it in or pull it out, just allow it to spread on its own, like melted butter spreading through your body.

You're conscious of all this, primarily of the breath, but also of the other activities, because you have to notice when you're slipping so that you keep yourself with the breath.

That's it. You've just taken the five khandhas and converted them into the path. You've converted them into right concentration, or at least in the direction of right concentration. Breath is form; feelings are, of course, feelings of pleasure and pain. The perception of breath is a perception. Your directed thought and evaluation are sankharas or fabrications. And then you're conscious of all this. What better place to settle down so that you can learn about the five khandhas? You've got all of them present here. You've got them all acting—because this is what the khandhas are. The aggregates are activities. The Buddha defines them with verbs. So you've got them in action. The best way to learn about them is to actually do something with them.

It's like becoming a good cook. If you want to learn about eggs, you don't just sit and look at eggs. You crack them open and put them in a pot or a pan. You boil them. You fry them. You make scrambled eggs. You try making scrambled eggs over high heat and then over low heat and see the difference. You combine them with different ingredients. After a while, you find which ways you like your eggs, and you've learned a lot about eggs in the process, much more than if you had just put the eggs on the counter and looked at them.

The Buddha says suffering is what? The five clinging-aggregates. How are you going to learn about suffering? Well, you put those aggregates all together right here. You learn to put them together in different ways. You can make them into different levels of concentration, and once the concentration gets developed, you apply it to different issues.

Ajaan Fuang used to say that there are three basic steps in practicing concentration. First is learning how to do it. Second is how to maintain it. That's where mindfulness comes in. It's needed to keep the concentration going. Then the third step is learning how to put it to use. You can use it to understand all kinds of things about yourself. The power of concentration can be used for all kinds of activities. The most important is that you can use it to understand pain, suffering. So you start by applying it to particular pains, particular moments of suffering in the mind. Or you can start using your newfound powers of concentration to look at the basic raw materials of concentration itself, because it's all right there.

So it's not that concentration practice is one thing and insight practice is something else. The two have to go together. The element of tranquility, one, allows you to settle down, so that you can see things properly. But also it gives you

the strength you need. Say you're going to try to understand pain. The mind has to have a feeling of well-being, a feeling of confidence, so that it can deal with the pain. No better way of getting confidence than to learn how to control your mind, to have it focus on what you want it to focus on and learn to have it stay focused there. When you can do that, you feel up to bigger challenges.

After all, as the Buddha said, pain and suffering are things you want to comprehend. Our normal reaction to them is trying to run away. We feel threatened by them; we feel weak in the face of them. But if you can strengthen the sense of the mind's well-being, you feel less threatened, you feel less weak, you're more encouraged to deal with this issue: Why is there pain? Why does physical pain cause pain in the mind?

That's one of those questions that most people don't ask. They just assume it has to be that way: There's pain in the body, so the mind has to be pained. But the Buddha made an important distinction. There can be pain in the body but there doesn't have to be suffering in the mind. There's a simple pain in the aggregates, in terms of the three characteristics, but there's also the suffering that's caused by craving. That's pain in terms of the four noble truths.

This is why, when the Buddha uses the word *dukkha* in the three characteristics, it's not quite the same as *dukkha* in the four noble truths. The three characteristics are just the way things are in and of themselves, but the suffering in the four noble truths is something that's created by craving and ignorance. That's something you can do something about. So you want to learn how to comprehend the difference between the two types of pain and suffering. In particular, how do craving and ignorance come in to take an ordinary physical pain and turn it into mental pain?

That's what you want to learn how to understand; that's what you want to do to use these powers of concentration you're working on. It requires ingenuity, because you find that the mind has lots of different ways of cooking up craving, cooking up ignorance, and therefore the different pathways by which pain turns into suffering are going to require different techniques, different ways of applying your powers of concentration, to gain insight.

Some of these are reported in the teachings of the great *ajānas*. They say to look at the pain, try to figure out exactly where the pain is strongest, and you find that it starts moving around. You begin to see that the pain is a lot more erratic than your original perception of it. Sometimes, when you use a very focused concentration, the pain will actually go away as long as you're focused. Other times, you can take that sense of well-being and just smother the pain—the well-being that comes with a comfortable breath spread out through the whole body.

As long as you focus on that, the pain goes into the background, and even though the potential for pain is there, you're not weaving it into an actual pain.

That shows you that the experience of pain is not just passive. There's an element of will, an element of present activity in the mind. That's precisely what you want to observe, because that's the troublemaker. That element of will involves those same old friends: perceptions and thought constructs. This again is where concentration comes in handy, because you've been learning about perceptions and thought constructs as you get the mind concentrated, so you're more familiar with the way they fashion your reality. The more you apply them consciously, then the more you can catch them as they do things in a subconscious way.

This is why we spend all this time focusing on the breath, focusing on the breath. The breath isn't the troublemaker, it's not the problem, but it's a great place to focus to develop the skills you need to deal with subtler problems, subtler issues.

A very simple way of seeing the power of perception is trying to keep this perception of breath in mind during all of your activities, not only while you're sitting here, but also throughout the day. Have a sense of breath, breath, breath. Make that your top priority. Other levels of reality can become secondary—your social level, your thoughts about what other people are doing, what they're saying, what they're thinking. Let them be secondary; let the breath be primary. Even your sense of the body as being solid: Let that dissolve away in the perception of breath energy, breath energy, and keep that going all day long. See what it does. See what you learn about the power of perception.

This is called learning how to make good use of what you've got. The amazing thing about it is that when you learn how to make use good use of what you've already got, it'll take you to places you've never been before.

So don't let your thoughts wander off into large abstractions. Keep them focused on what you've got right here, right now, because this is where the path gets developed.