

Building on Certainty

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It's good to get out to a place like this where you can sort out your head. And sort out your body as well.

We live so much with words, phrases, ideas, opinions—our own and other people's—that it's good to be able to step out of all that. Because a lot of those things are uncertain. You need a basic skill for sorting out what's really useful and how far is it useful and what's not useful at all.

So the Buddha's test comes down to some very simple and immediate things. Look at the mind in the present moment, look what it's doing. In other words, look for its intentions. Look to see how much stress or pain or suffering those intentions are causing and learn how to cause less. Those are the basic instructions. The test is something very immediate: your own immediate experience.

And yet for most of us, immediate experience is a big unknown. We don't look very carefully to things that we should know most intimately—our own intentions. We hardly know them at all. So meditation is a process of making yourself more intimate with what's right here, right now. And particularly in these terms: What are you doing? What are the results? You'd think it would be something we'd know, but our attention has been pulled away other places. So it's time to get back and re-establish it here.

Ajaan Fuang was invited one time to teach meditation to some very new monks at Wat Asokaram., and this was one of the points he made: We have all kinds of doubts about whose teachings are right, whose teachings are wrong. And that's just talking about the Dhamma—there are all these other issues in the world outside that are even more uncertain. He said, "Well, there are a few things you can be certain about, start right there. One is, is your breath coming in? Is it going out? Start where you can be sure." And once you gradually establish a beachhead there, your knowledge can build on that.

The next question is: Is it comfortable or not? Well, what do you mean by comfortable? You have to explore. This is where you develop sensitivity inside. What kind of breathing feels right? What kind of breathing doesn't feel right? You have to watch it for a while. Stick with long breathing for a while and see what it does. You may have some preconceived notions that it's better to have long breathing than short breathing in the meditation, but is that always true? Check it out. And if you don't know if it feels right or not, compare it with something else. Try shorter breathing for a while and then note which one feels better. And then stick with whatever rhythm, whatever texture of breathing feels best.

Then you can try different ways of thinking about the breath. Instead of thinking of the body as a big bellows—with the nose as the little hole at the end of the bellows—think of it as a big sponge. The breath energy is coming in and out through all the pores of the sponge. Put

that mental picture in your mind. Think of it as a possibility and then identify: Where are the pores in your body right now? How would they feel if breath energy were coming in, going out all the time? Can you identify in which parts of the body that kind of energy feels blocked? Can you loosen it up?

This way, you're learning both about the body and about the mind, how your mental picture of the breathing can have an impact on the breathing, and what way of conceiving of the breath, what way of focusing on the sensation of the breath, feels best right now. As you explore that, you develop knowledge.

What this requires is focusing on something that's immediately apparent and really paying close attention to it, and then experimenting with it. You use your imagination to think of new ways of breathing, new ways of conceiving of the breath. But then you've got to test whatever your imagination comes up with. And over time it becomes a skill.

You establish a beachhead here that's more and more solid as you become more and more sensitive to what's going on, what you're doing, what the results are. And in this way your knowledge expands.

At the same time, it becomes more and more refined. Over time, you get more and more alerted to different intentions that you have floating around in the mind that you hadn't noticed before. You begin to see how they really do function and how they have an effect.

What this requires is that as a meditator you're always willing to learn. Something you thought you may have known, well, look at it again until you've tested it from every angle. And then look at it again. See if there's an angle that you didn't explore before.

As the mind begins to settle down in its more refined knowledge of the present, it has a greater and greater sense of stability. Here's something it can stick with.

This is the other part of learning about the truth: that *you* have to be true, too. In other words, you can't just make a few quick assumptions and run away. You've got to stick with the test. When the Buddha says to test his teachings, he's not asking you to test them for five minutes or five days. He says test them over a long period of time. In the course of doing that, you start testing yourself as well.

The other part of Ajaan Fuang's teaching was not only is the breath for real, the next one is are *you* for real? Are you willing to test things and come back and test them again? And really be observant and really be honest with yourself about what your intentions are, honest with yourself about what the results are? It's when you've got the combination of something that's immediately apparent and your own truthfulness: That's when truth comes. Without that quality of truthfulness, you can watch all kinds of true things but your opinions get in the way, your preconceived notions get in the way, and you don't admit it to yourself. As a result, you don't really know anything for sure.

So bring the two of these things together. What's happening right here, right now? And not just happening in the sense of watching a TV show happening, it's what are you doing?

What are the results you're getting out of this? And you're being really true in watching both: That's when you get a solid foundation in the truth.

And you find that that foundation, once it's established, really changes the power balance in the mind. Instead of trying to shore yourself up with an opinion about this or an opinion about that, a conceit about this—you don't need those things. Those things are weak. Instinctively, you know they are and so you try to put up all kinds of walls of protection, trying to shore them up against their inevitable uncertainty. But when you have knowledge that comes from what's happening right now, seeing yourself, catching yourself—and particularly catching yourself doing things that you don't like to see yourself doing: When you start seeing that, you can begin to know, "Okay, now we're really getting someplace. You're causing stress, harm, in ways that you normally wouldn't admit to yourself." When you suddenly see that, that's when you know you're developing some truthfulness.

For the most part we don't like to see our faults. But the Buddha's way of getting you to see them is to have you develop nice, comfortable states of concentration, where the body feels balanced, not too heavy, not too light, kind of like Goldilocks' porridge: not too hot, not too cold, everything just right. This puts you in a really good mood. And then, when you're in a good mood, you start being willing to admit the things that you didn't like to admit to yourself before. And you don't feel knocked over by it, you don't feel threatened by it, because you've got something more solid to stand on.

So learn to base your views on something you really can know: this activity going on in the present moment, the intentions of the mind that are constantly shaping things and doing it so often and so much and so consistently that you hardly notice them—it's part of the background noise. And the results you get: There's a certain amount of pressure and stress and tension that you take to be necessary, as simply a part of being aware, having a body, having a mind. But learn to look at these things more carefully.

Even the simple stress and tension in breathing: When you begin to see that that's not necessary, you can start asking yourself, "Well, maybe there are other things going on in the present moment that are not necessary as well." It is possible to breathe in such a way that you feel really full all the time, with a sense of refreshment. Each breath feels really refreshing coming in because you've paid careful attention. And all that tense breathing you did in the past, it really wasn't necessary. You did it because you weren't paying careful attention. Now you give some attention to the breath and you begin to see its other possibilities, its other potentials.

Then you apply the same attention to the mind. There are ways of thinking, ways of constructing reality that add a lot of unnecessary tension. Learn to catch sight of that, learn to drop it, whatever it is that's causing the tension. In this way, your knowledge is founded on truth, both the truth of what's actually happening and the truthfulness of your self-honesty.

That way, your knowledge has a really good foundation. And when it's well-founded, it can really make a change in the mind.