

Keep It Simple

September 14, 2006

What we're doing here is pretty simple—and it's important that we keep it simple. The mind has a tendency to make things too complex, to spin all kinds of elaborations around what it wants out of the meditation, where the meditation used to be few days ago, where it is now, all kinds of stories, all kinds of mental proliferation. And none of that is really part of the path. The path is something simple: eight factors.

Sitting here quietly, you've got right speech, right action, and right livelihood under control. The other five factors all work together, particularly the factors for right concentration. Start out with right effort: Look at the mind, see what's skillful in the mind and what's not skillful. You know that mindfulness and alertness are skillful, so you stick with them. Try to be alert to the breath and keep remembering to stay alert to the breath. For the time being, any other thought that comes along not related to the breath can be dropped as an unskillful thought.

So you're staying with the breath, mindful and alert: that's right effort right there. It shades into right mindfulness: just being with the breath in and of itself.

That gives you three qualities now: You're mindful and alert and ardent. Ardency is right effort as applied in mindfulness practice. Mindfulness means remembering to stay with the breath. Be alert to the breath and allow the breath to be comfortable. That's when alertness moves into evaluation, one of the factors of jhana. As you consistently stay with the breath, your mindfulness develops into directed thought. As you ardently stay right with the breath each time it comes in, each time it goes out, that ardency turns into singleness of preoccupation: You really are staying with this one thing right here.

That way, you've got all the causal factors for right concentration, the first level of jhana: directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation. The results are a sense of ease and a sense of rapture. That's all you've got to figure out.

So try to keep it basic. Try to keep it spare. Elaborations tend to get in the way and obscure things. We think that by elaborating on things, we're figuring things out in advance, but we're not. We're just cluttering up the landscape, mucking up the works. And as for how long it's going to take to get results, don't think about it. That's an anticipation. It's a typical function of the mind, but something you don't need right now. If you notice that kind of thinking taking over, let it drop.

As long as you keep it simple, it stays a lot easier. It's hard enough to maintain this kind of focus, but all the elaboration doesn't help. You want to keep things basic, simple. That way you maintain your focus, which is what it's all about: getting the mind to be really solidly focused on one activity over and over and over again. Thinking about the breath, being aware of the breath, reminding yourself not to leave the breath: It's a cluster of activities, but it's focused in one direction, toward the breath. And as you get more precisely focused in, you can drop some of the extra activities.

When the breath feels comfortable coming in, going out, think of spreading that sense of comfort throughout the body. When you can maintain that sense of full-body awareness as you breathe in, as you breathe out, there'll come a point where you don't have to evaluate things anymore. You can't improve the breath and you see that evaluation is actually getting in the way of settling down further. So you simplify things. You drop the evaluation. Just stay with the sensation of the breath. This is a lot of what the practice is: making it simpler and simpler as you go along, figuring out where your efforts are superfluous, where they're unnecessary, and letting them drop.

And you're applying the four noble truths as you do that. Wherever there's any stress that you notice is unnecessary, just stop the cause, abandon the cause. In other words, stop doing whatever is causing the stress.

So as we're meditating, we're just progressively making ourselves less and less burdened. The trick lies in being consistent. This is why restraint of the senses is such an important foundation for the practice. The more consistently you keep watch over the mind to make sure it doesn't go off in unskillful directions in the course of the day, the easier it's going to be when you sit and meditate.

In some of the texts, the Buddha talks about step-by-step practice, with restraint of the senses coming before meditation practice. But it's best to see all the different parts of the practice as helping one another along. In other words, if you don't get a sense of ease and peace with the meditation, it's harder to maintain control over your senses, because the nature the mind is that it's looking for happiness. If it doesn't find happiness in the meditation, it's going to go sneaking out to find happiness someplace else. So restraint of the senses helps your meditation; your meditation helps the restraint of the senses. This applies to all the different factors of the path. When the mind is at peace, for instance, it's easier to stick with the precepts; and when you can stick with the precepts, the mind can be more at peace.

All the factors of the path shade into one another. When the Buddha sets them out, it's nice and linear. But the actual practice requires that you work on all

the different factors consistently. It sounds as if you've got a lot of chickens to look after, but it is not really the case. Just try to keep being mindful of how things are going in the mind—what's skillful, what's unskillful—and remember to keep that issue in mind as you practice, as you go through the day. That simplifies a lot of things. One major focus: What is the mind doing right now? When you sense anything unskillful, you let it go. You sense anything skillful, you encourage it, you maintain it.

This is why the Buddha said that right view, right mindfulness, and right effort are the three most essential factors that get everything together, so that you can reach what's called the heart of the path, which is right concentration. As I said, it sounds like a lot of chickens to watch out for, a lot of little baby chicks running around that you've got to keep under control, but that's really not the case. Just stay right here. Make yourself very sensitive right here to any stress that you may be causing, and look to see whether it seems to be necessary or not. When you see that it's unnecessary, you drop it.

That's how the meditation becomes a skill. You stay focused on the real issues. This is why it's so important to understand what mindfulness is, just keeping all this in mind. Sometimes you hear mindfulness described as being totally aware of the present moment, being choiceless in your awareness. Well, choiceless awareness is fine when there are no problems. You're free to know anything you like, be aware of it, be all-embracing in your awareness, with no judgments, nothing at all. The problem, though, is that there *is* a problem: There's suffering. And when there's a problem, you want to know where to focus your attention so you can most effectively deal with it.

The Buddha points out the pattern: There's suffering, but there's a cause of suffering—and it's in the mind. The way to uproot the cause is to work on developing the factors of the path. So that's what we're doing right now. There is a larger framework to what we're doing. As long as you understand the framework, then you can focus in on what needs to be done. That simplifies things a lot. You don't have to be aware of the infinity of the present moment, just be aware of what the mind is doing right now, the choices it's making. Be more alert. More mindful. And in particular, be alert to the issue of where there's any unnecessary stress. Once you've got that focus and you keep it simple, the practice goes a lot more smoothly.