

## *Learning How to Learn*

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When my father went to visit me while I was in Thailand, I arranged for him to sit and meditate with my teacher. And the first question my father asked before he sat down was, "I'm Christian," he said. "Is it going to get in the way of meditation?" My teacher said, "No. What we're going to focus on is the breath. The breath isn't the Buddhist, it isn't Christian, it doesn't belong to any particular religion. It's common property all over the world. So when you focus on the breath, that leads you straight to your mind, your awareness in the present moment. Then, when any questions come out of the meditation, we're talking about the mind. We're not talking about Buddhism or Christianity or any particular religion. We just talk about issues that arise in the mind. That way," he said, "we can understand each other."

So focus on the breath. As my teacher said, it's common property, so common that we hardly even notice it. But it's a good place to start, because the breath is with you all the time, something you can watch at any time at all. Notice how it's coming in, notice how it's going out, where you feel the breath. Does it feel comfortable? Would it feel more comfortable if it were longer or shorter? You can try and experiment with it. For instance, if the end of the in-breath or the end of the out-breath seems squeezed, that's a sign it's too long. On the other hand, if you don't get a sense of fullness from the breath, that you're not getting enough breath, maybe you could make the breath longer.

So experiment and see what feels just right. Learn how you can sense where in the process of breathing out you can sense the signs that the breath is just long enough, and it's time to stop the out-breath. Or when you're breathing in, how do you know it's just long enough so that you can stop the in-breath? And when do you feel a need to start breathing in the opposite direction? Try to sensitize yourself to this as much as possible.

This is an area that we've pretty much desensitized ourselves to, because we're more interested in things outside, more interested in ideas that we can read or take in from the senses. Then the breath gets ignored. That might not seem like such a bad thing, but, after all, the breath is the energy of life. It's what keeps us going. And it stands to reason that if the breath feels uncomfortable, it's not going to be good for the body; it's not going to be food for the mind. If it does feel comfortable, it can help nourish the body, nourish the mind.

But more than that, if you focus on the breath, you're in the present moment. This is basically where life happens. All too often, we're someplace else, not really

paying full attention both to what's happening and to what we're doing in response. As that chant said just now: "We're the owners of our actions," and yet we're hardly around to witness our actions, so our motivations for action get hidden very easily. Yet these are the things that shape our lives. It stands to reason that if you want to shape your life well, you want to pay careful attention to what you're doing, and what you're doing is being done in the present moment. So if you want to see your actions and your motivations clearly, you have to watch them right here.

So we focus on the breath as a way of anchoring ourselves in the present, so that we can see what's actually happening, so that we can make more informed choices, direct our lives in the direction we want them to go. Otherwise, what happens is that there will come a point when your death is in the present moment, and the life you've taken for granted is suddenly going to end. You're going to start looking back on your life, and the choices you made, the things that you did, will loom large. The things you didn't do will loom large as well. If you can look back on choices that were well made, decisions that you can be proud of, that makes the whole process of going, a lot easier. It's better to look back on the past with a sense of satisfaction than with a sense of regret. As long as you have breath coming in and going out, you have the opportunity to make the kind of choices that you can look back on with satisfaction. So being with the breath helps you take advantage of that.

At the same time, being with the breath puts you in a better position to learn about your actions. The big issue in life is whether we find happiness or not, and it comes from our actions, from what we do. Yet if you're not clear about your actions, you're not going to be clear about the connection between your actions and the particular states of mind or situations in which you find yourself. You don't know what led to where you are, because you weren't really paying attention to what you were doing. But if you have a clear sense of what you're doing, it's a lot easier to connect the dots between the cause and the effect.

And that's what enables you to learn. You see that you made a mistake because it led to unfortunate circumstances, and you can resolve not to make that mistake again. It's basic common sense, but most of us don't live with common sense because we don't know how to learn from our mistakes.

This is a lot of what the Buddha's teachings are about: how to observe what you're doing and to observe the results of what you're doing, so that if you sense that you're unskillful, you can make changes. All the issues he points to are things that are immediately here in our present awareness: what we're doing, what we're experiencing, especially in terms of pleasure and pain, happiness and sadness.

There's nothing mysterious or hidden about these things, and yet we *make* them mysterious and hidden because we're looking someplace else.

Or maybe we're looking at our actions, but we're not asking the right questions. That's the other part of learning from your mistakes: not only watching your actions and their results, also learning how to ask the right questions about them. In other words, what's motivating the action? What kind of mental quality underlies the action? Is it skillful or not? Is it harmful or not? Look into that.

And how do you see the connection between an action and its result? You have to look continually. This is one of the reasons why we meditate, to develop that ability to look continually, to perfect that ability, to master it. All too often, we look at things only in little bits and snatches. We don't look long enough to see where the cause is and how it issues in a result, because we're jumping around into too many other things at the same time.

One of the main purposes of meditation is to develop insight. Sometimes you read about "insight techniques," that all you have to do is act repeatedly in a certain way or make your mind do a certain thing, and it'll yield an insight. But the Buddha never taught that way. There's no technique that guarantees insight. He does, however, recommend places to look, questions to ask. Look at your intentions, look at your actions and their results while you're doing them, and look at the results after they're done.

Even with states of mind, he says, look at them as actions, not that you *are* a particular state, just tell yourself there is this particular state going on in the mind. In order to look at mind states in a more impersonal way, without identifying with them, you ask a series of questions: Is this mind state constant? Is it something you can depend on? If it's undependable, can you base your happiness on it? If it's undependable and you can't base your happiness on it, why would you want to identify with it? And if you don't identify with it, what do you do next?

Or on an even more basic level, you may find that you have trouble getting the mind to settle down either because of sensual desire or ill will for somebody that's obsessing your mind. You may be slothful or torpid, restless or anxious, or just uncertain about what you're doing. How do you learn to observe those states so that you can get past them? See if you can watch them coming and going, because they do come and they do go, and there's a reason for the coming and a reason for the going.

The commentaries try to give an exhaustive list of the various reasons, but the Buddha never did that, because it's better for you to learn how to observe for yourself when, say, sloth comes: What comes along with the sloth? When it goes, why did it go? When you learn to observe for yourself, then you've gained genuine

insight. It's not simply a matter of memorizing what's in the texts or trying to impose a system of classification on your mind states. You want to be able to observe, to learn from what's actually happening in your mind.

Psychologists have shown that we're very bad at observing our actions and their results. You'd think that it would be the one thing we'd know really well because we're doing things all the time, and they're right here in the present moment for us to look at. But we don't. We do something and hope that it'll bring happiness, even though we've done it in the past and it hasn't brought us any real happiness, but we hope again and again and again that maybe sometime we'll get it right. One of the main ironies of life is that the issues that should be our main concern are things we don't really observe. So when we've made a mistake, we don't really learn from it.

That's one of the things we've got to work on as we meditate: learning how to learn, learning how to observe. If you don't do that, then no matter how many years you practice an insight technique, it's not going to yield any genuine insights. It's your own powers of observation that are going to make all the difference.

So we come to the present moment both to get the mind to settle down with a sense of ease and to gain insight. The ease is important not only for itself, but also because it puts in a better position to see. That's part of learning how to learn as well: learning how to put your mind in a position where it has a enough sense of well-being that it's willing to admit mistakes, learn from mistakes, and develop the ingenuity to try to figure out some other way of acting so that you can stop making those mistakes and start getting results that you really want, results that are really worth all the effort that we put into living.

So use the breath as an anchor in the present moment, and use it also as a way of gauging what you're doing. When you focus on the breath, are you focusing too hard? How can you tell? Or is your focus not strong enough? What are the telltale signs? You're the only person who's going to observe this for yourself. Here is your laboratory right here for seeing cause and effect in the present moment and for developing the skills that allow you to see cause and effect in other areas as well. For only when you see cause and effect can you begin to master the process. And only when you master the process can you really use it to yield a happiness that's lasting and worthwhile.