

Patience & Consistency

February 17, 2010

The Pali word for meditation, *bhavana*, means to develop, to help something to grow. That's what we're doing here. We're trying to grow mindfulness. We're trying to grow concentration. And it's useful to think about this in the same way you'd grow a plant. It's not the case that you put a seed in the ground, water it a little bit, and the plant suddenly springs full-blown out of the ground. That happens only in cartoons. It takes a lot of steady care. Think about the Sun shining every day, every day, every day constantly. You apply water on a regular basis. And the seed sits there in the soil every day, even more constantly than the Sun. After all, when the Earth turns, there's no more sunlight during the nighttime. But the seed is there in the soil getting nourishment all the time. It's not the case that it takes off on weekends or comes and goes. If the seed came and went, it wouldn't grow. It has to stay very still.

It's the same with your mindfulness and alertness. You have to be as steady and consistent as possible in staying with the breath, staying with whatever your object is in the concentration. The greater the steadiness, the greater the consistency, then the more the good qualities of mind will grow.

Yet we don't want to hear this. We'd like to have those peak experiences we've heard about. Now, there are ways that you can induce extreme experiences in the mind either consciously or unconsciously, but that's not the point of the meditation. You're trying to develop mind states that you can watch over periods of time so that you can understand: How does a mind state form? How do skillful states form? How do unskillful states form? In the case of the skillful ones, you have to stick with them for long periods of time, get them going so that they're solid and dependable, so that you can understand them. As for the unskillful ones, it takes a lot of good steady concentration so that you can maintain a foundation and watch these states as they arise, stay for a while, and pass away, without your getting sucked into them. You need a good firm foundation. And you have to be used to staying with that foundation regardless.

It's like Ulysses, bound to the mast of the ship that sailed past the island of the Sirens. If he hadn't been bound to the mast, he would have steered the ship in their direction, and that would've been the end of the ship. And it's the same with us as a thought arises. We're were so used to just going into the thought and inhabiting it. It requires a real training in new habits for the mind not to get

pulled in, for us to stay and just watch these things as events coming and going in the mind.

So you're trying to get a really good solid concentration here. And for the concentration to be solid, the causes for going into concentration have to be solid. If you're going to stay with the breath, stay with each breath, each breath, each breath—but don't let this get mechanical—all the way in, all the way out.

It helps to have some strategies for getting the mind to stay this way consistently. That's why you work on getting the breath comfortable and being aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. A centered and broad awareness lasts a lot longer and is also more helpful in gaining insight than a very narrowly focused one, because a narrow focus gets confining after a while. And it's easily knocked off center. But when your awareness is broad and covers the whole body, you can maintain this centered but broad state of mind in all your activities. As you move around in this, thoughts come and go through mind, but you can maintain your frame of reference—which is the body as a whole—and not get knocked off your foundation.

So watch the breath.

You can induce a sense of comfort in the breath in one of two ways. One is just posing the question in mind: What kind of breathing would feel good? Or: How would long breathing feel? See how the body responds. How would it respond to shorter breathing? See how the body responds. You don't have to do the mechanics. The body will take care of that for you. Just pose that question in the mind.

If the body refuses to respond, you can test it for a while. Just keep breathing in long for a while. Do it more intentionally. Then try short breathing intentionally. Deep. Shallow. Fast. Slow. Heavy. Light. Test all the various possibilities, because sometimes the body gets into a rut. It has one habitual way of breathing, or a very limited range of ways of breathing, and doesn't want to move out of that rut. But if you force it a little bit, maybe it'll find that it actually prefers another kind of breathing.

The purpose of this is to give mind a place where it can settle down and be consistent in its gaze, be consistent in its mindfulness, its alertness, its persistence—all the good qualities that nourish the mind. It's not that you gobble down a huge amount in a short time and then wander off. You take a bit here and a bit there then a bit and a bit, and just stick with it bit by bit by bit.

As Ajaan Fuang used to say, what we're doing is a little tiny thing, but you have to do it consistently. In Thai this was a pun. There's the word *nit*, which means little, and the word *nit*, which is spelled differently but is pronounced the

same way, which means consistently. So you do something that's just a little bit, but you do it consistently, in the same way that the Sun just shines consistently.

As the seed is subject to the consistent sunlight, consistent water, and consistent soil, it has a chance to grow. It's not dramatic, but then you've probably noticed with plants that the ones that grow very quickly are the ones that die very quickly. It's the plants that grow slowly, particularly the trees that grow slowly, that will last hundreds of years. So you have to watch out for the impatience that wants to get quick results, dramatic results right away.

Remind yourself the meditation is a lifelong process. It's not as if you're trying to get yourself into extreme states. You're trying to watch the mind, observe the mind, so that you can understand the mind. That requires a consistent gaze, because otherwise we see the mind in just little bits and pieces. It's like connect-the-dots. There's a dot here, a dot there, but there are huge spaces between them. And these dots don't come with numbers. So we end up connecting them any old which way and think we understand something. After all, we have our little bits and pieces of evidence. But if you watch things consistently, it's not just dots. You see the whole picture. And you begin to see that where you drew the lines has nothing to do with the reality of the situation at all.

So you need this quality of consistency, just sticking with it, sticking with it, sticking with it. In some cases, just a little bit of pleasure comes along, but respect that pleasure. Don't despise it. Don't say, "This is a little tiny thing. It's not what I'm here for. I want something big." You step on it. You don't give it a chance to grow. After all, all plants start out that way, just little tiny shoots peeking out of the ground. If you step on the shoot every time it comes out, it's not going to grow. So when there's a little bit of pleasure, nourish it. Protect it. Water it. Make sure that no bugs come and eat it.

Bugs are the hindrances. They may come, but you pull them away. You let them go. You let them pass. You're here to focus on the breath. Notice where you feel it. Find a spot in the body that's especially sensitive, so that the slightest discomfort in the breath will be immediately apparent, and you can make adjustments. And again, if you're right there with that sensitive spot, sometimes you don't have to consciously make adjustments. Just stay with a sense of the spot, and it will tell you when to breathe in, when to breathe out.

The important thing is you try to be as consistent as possible, as steady as possible with your gaze. It's like trying to light a fire on a windy day. You have to protect this little tiny flame, until ultimately it catches so that it's big enough to take care of itself. But especially in the beginning, it requires a lot of hovering around being very protective. And you've probably seen it happen. The little tiny,

tiny flame: How could this ever become a large fire? It's hopeless. But if you abandon it, you really will be hopeless. That little tiny spark will have no chance at all. But if you cup your hands around it, protect it from the wind, it'll grow a bit, it'll grow a bit, and then as you're patient with it, it's got a chance.

Or you can compare it to sharpening a knife. In the old days, they didn't have mechanical knife sharpeners. You had a stone and you had some water and you had the knife, and that was it. You rubbed the knife against the stone at the right angle and you'd water it a little bit and rub some more and you had to be very careful how you rubbed it so that you didn't get impatient and try to rub it down too fast or put too much pressure on any one spot, because that would ruin the blade. You had to be very even and consistent in the pressure you applied. And you found ways to encourage yourself as you were doing that.

This is one of the skills many of us have lost: how to keep the mind entertained, how to keep it occupied with any slow process that requires consistency and patience. There are games the mind can play with itself to keep itself entertained. How many breaths can you stick with the breath? This is one of the reasons why they do counting meditation. If you find that you were to stay with the breath for nine breaths, then the next time, okay, let's make it ten, then let's make it eleven, then let's skip up to 20 and see if you can double it—whatever you can do to keep the mind occupied, keep it absorbed in what you're doing. You can play with the breath, experiment with it.

The important thing is that you're as consistent as possible in watching it. It's only then that the meditation will have a chance, and the good qualities you want in the mind will really have an opportunity to grow.