

Doing

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One of the purposes of the meditation is to get to see what the mind is doing, because what the mind is doing can either create happiness or create suffering. In fact, as the Buddha pointed out, that's the big problem in life: the fact that the mind usually acts for the purpose of creating happiness, but it ends up creating just the opposite. And you want to know why, so that you don't have to do that anymore.

To watch the mind in action, we have to get at least part of it still. That's why we're focusing on the breath, trying to figure out what way of breathing feels best right now: long or short, fast or slow, heavy or light, deep or shallow; which parts of the body feel best doing the breathing, which parts should be relaxed and not have to do any work in the breathing. There are lots of things you can explore here. But it's all for the purpose of getting the mind to settle down.

Once you've found something that's comfortable, you stick with it. As long as it stays comfortable, you don't have to do any more evaluation. Just be with the sensation of the breath so that the mind can settle down, because it's only when it's settled down that you can watch its movements. This is the Buddha's main interest in having us meditate.

We're not here to see what the mind *is*. We're here to see what it's *doing*, because if we start thinking about "is," we start getting involved in definitions and abstract issues that tend to elaborate and go very far away. It's called *objectification*, and the Buddha said you want to avoid that kind of thinking: trying figure out what kind of object the mind is or what kind of object other people are, or what kind of object the world is. Those kinds of thoughts, the Buddha said, just turn around and attack you. They don't lead to the end of suffering.

If you want to get to the end of suffering, you have to watch what the mind is doing, because that's something happening right before your very eyes. In fact, it's closer than your eyes, and yet you don't see it. Your focus is out someplace else. Think of the mind as like the lens of a camera whose focal point is way far away. You want to bring the focal point in, bring it in, bring it in until it's actually inside the lens. You can watch what the mind is doing, and this is strategically important, because everything that we know about ourselves and the world comes through our actions.

In fact, our sense of self is something that's built around our actions. There's a desire. Then there's the question of what you have under your control that you

can actually manipulate or work with so you can bring about that desire. And then who's going to be experiencing the results of that action? That's how we get the idea of the self as the agent and then the self as the experiencer, or you could think of it self as the producer and then the self as the consumer of happiness. It's all about action.

We have lots of selves because we've had many different desires. If you were to take them out and line them all up, you'd have a really long line. Some of those selves are pretty uncomplicated: the ones associated with desires that involve doing things you like to do and you get good results. As for the ones that were around doing things that you didn't like to do and gave bad results, in other words, the prototype selves that just didn't work out at all, those just get thrown away.

The difficult ones are the ones that come around actions that you like to do and give bad results, or the ones that you don't like to do, but give good results. Those are the difficult selves. They can be very insistent, especially the ones that involve doing things you like to do but give bad results. They can give all kinds of excuses for why it didn't work out that first time, but if you try it again, it's going to work out this time. They're the ones that deal in a lot of denial. Those are probably the trickiest ones of all.

As for the ones that involve doing things you don't like to do but give good results, they can sometimes get pretty irritating, too. You have to learn how to make them more attractive, more skillful, give them more strategies so that you actually can get yourself to do the things that you don't like to do but you know deep down inside will lead to good results in the future.

So you've got all kinds of selves in here.

When the Buddha's talking about *self*, he's not talking so much about an abstract idea, or saying well, a self has to be permanent in order to qualify as a self, or that you have ultimate selves or conventional selves. He says the issue of self comes up around the issue of control. What kind of things can you control and what kind of things can you not? You'll find there are some things that you have some amount of control over, and that's where you want to focus your energies. As for the things where you realize there's no control, just let those go.

Of course, the question of control has a lot to do with the question of skill. This is why the Buddha focuses so much attention on the issue of skillful and unskillful action. He wants you to explore how much control you actually get as you try to develop more and more skill. He doesn't tell you at the very beginning, "Well, just give up." We know that ultimately you can't control your body because some day it's going to die against your wishes and get sick against your

wishes. But he doesn't say to give up on it. The same with feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, consciousness. He doesn't tell you just to give up and say, "Well, that's not my self, so I'll just learn how to accept things as they are." That short-circuits the whole path. You never get anywhere.

He says to try training these things into a state of stillness, a state of well-being. This is what mindfulness and concentration practice are all about. You've got the form of the breath, which shapes your sense of the body. You've got the feelings that go with the breath, and we're trying to give rise to comfortable ones. How much can you play with the breath? How much influence do you have on the breath? How much does the breath lie under your control?

In the beginning, it seems pretty sloppy. But as you get more and more used to it, you find that you actually can get more skillful in not being a control freak, but having some control over things. You've got the right perception of the breath, thinking of the breath filling the whole body, so that it becomes more subtle and it can give rise to pleasant sensations anywhere in the body. You think about the breath. You're aware of all of this.

You've taken these five aggregates and you're turning them into something good; something skillful. You're getting more control over them. So it's inevitable that there will be a certain sense of self that develops around this. But it's a healthy one. It's a self that's willing to learn, a self that's devoted to looking for a happiness that doesn't cause any harm to anyone. As you work with the breath, you'll get a better and better sense of how much control you actually do have in the present moment.

Sometimes there are influences coming in from past actions that are really hard to overcome. Sometimes there are those that seem hard to overcome, but they actually aren't. How will you know which is which? By experimenting. By exploring the extent to which you can actually make a difference through your present actions. This is what the issue of control comes down to: the question of how much freedom of choice you have in the present moment.

And you expand your understanding, you expand your sensitivity to that by trying to be as skillful as possible, because it's through your exploration of the freedom you have here, the extent to which you have some control: That's how you come to the opening of ultimate freedom, the freedom of something totally unconditioned. At that point, the question of control or lack of control becomes irrelevant, because that kind of freedom, and the kind of happiness that comes with the freedom, doesn't have to be protected, doesn't have to be strategized. It's just there.

This is why all the forest ajaans say that when you actually get there, the question of self or not-self becomes irrelevant, because self and not-self are defined around control. And here, the issue of control or no control becomes irrelevant.

This is why the Buddha focused so much attention on action, because it's through looking at your own actions and getting a sense of what their range of power is that you're going to find the ultimate happiness.

I was reading a book recently by someone who saw the Buddha's teachings mainly as a reaction to the metaphysical theories of his day, claiming that the Buddha came up with a new metaphysical theory: that everything was process. Nothing had any substance, or any eternal substance—as if it were just a question of: Well, he didn't like their ideas, so he tossed out a new idea.

But the Buddha was not irresponsible that way. The way he taught things was because he was very strategic. He had seen what worked in gaining true freedom for himself, and he recommended that we follow the same way, think in the same way. That's why we have right view as part of the path. We're not just going through a mechanical operation here. He had a purpose for recommending that we look at things as processes, as actions, cause and effect, because that opens things up in the mind. This way of looking has a really pragmatic value.

So you look at the issues of action: cause and effect, control, lack of control and what you can learn by becoming more skillful in watching all this right here in the present moment. This is why the Buddha put so much emphasis on what you do. He told you to put aside, for the time being, the question of what you are, what the world is. Those questions of "is" and "are"—these forms of objectification—just get in the way, whereas questions of what you're doing give focus and direction to the path.