

Expand Your Expectations

July 25, 2011

As you meditate, try not to have too narrow an idea of what can happen during the meditation. Some really good things can happen and some really bad ones can happen, i.e. really pleasant, really unpleasant.

Maybe the mind can go deeper than you thought. And when the mind is going really well, it might suddenly flip and start wandering all over the place.

So all kinds of things can happen. This means you have to be watchful. Be heedful: Look after what you're doing, make sure you stick with it. Then try to push yourself a little bit more in whatever seems to be the right direction.

All too often, we have the fear that if we put a lot of extra effort into the practice, it's not going to pay off: that we're going to run up against a wall. So we tend to hold back. Or we may have a very limited idea of what we're capable of.

I remember talking to a woman many years back who had been meditating for many years. She told me, "You know, I've never really taken seriously the idea that I could ever gain awakening." And that's sad.

All the potentials that are needed for awakening are right here. You've got the body, breathing. You've got your mind, thinking and aware. You've got all the different aggregates; you've got all the different types of fabrication. Everything's happening right here. It's just a matter of putting things together just right.

Maybe part of the problem is that you narrow yourself down to a little tiny corner and keep yourself cornered there.

So it's important that you open things up a little bit. Think of the breath going places it's never gone before—or at least you've never thought of it going there. When an obstacle comes up that normally sets you off, think of the possibility that you don't have to go off with it this time.

It's very easy to develop some bad habits as a meditator that place limitations on you. Try to air out your mind for the time being. Say: All kinds of things are possible.

And particularly the steadiness of your gaze: Try to improve that, because that makes a huge difference in things. It's very easy to focus on the breath for a while and then go off for a bit then come back for a while and then go off for a bit. There are these little bumps in the breath that tend to knock us off. See if you can ride right through the bumps.

Some people, when they start watching the mind, realize that they have a tendency, say, when the breath has gone out and before it comes back in again:

That's the time when the mind tends to wander. It goes off just a little bit and then it'll come back. How about making up your mind that you're going to stay with it all the way through that little gap?

Or wherever it is you tend to notice that you have your little lapses of mindfulness, your lapses of awareness, alertness: Try to ride right through them, drill right through them.

After all, we're here to attain what we haven't previously attained, to realize what we haven't previously realized. That means we have to learn how to do things we haven't previously done. If you want to get special results, you have to do special things.

This doesn't necessarily mean that you have to push yourself to the limit in terms of knocking yourself out. You want to find a way of putting energy into the meditation in a way that gives energy back, so that you can keep recycling it. That's the kind of focus you want to develop. So try to give yourself to the meditation a little bit more than you have in the past.

This is one of the reasons why generosity is one of the prerequisites for meditating. You learn from experience that the good things in life come when you give. You don't just sit there and wait for them to come—or demand that they come to you. And your first thought isn't what you're going to get out of this. Your first thought should be, "What do I give?"

To begin with, you have to give up some of your preconceived notions. As you find out, you have to give up a lot of your preconceived notions about yourself.

That can be interpreted in a lot of ways.

One of the basic principles of appropriate attention is that you put aside any questions about "Who am I? What am I? Do I exist? Do I not exist?" And there's another sutta (I've forgotten the number now, it's in the Anguttara) where the Buddha says you put aside the assumption that you're good, you put aside the assumption that you're bad.

You may have a sense of where your limitations have been in the past, but they don't have to stay there. You can push them. Try to realize where your strengths are and build on those, capitalize on those.

So really focus on being with the breath right now and try to be there as consistently and steadily as you can. The quality of your effort is what's going to make a difference. This means riding herd on the mind, not allowing even the least little bit of wandering off.

One of the best ways of developing this kind of total giving over to the meditation is in the course of the day having some really short meditation periods. Just five minutes. Tell yourself, "I'm going to settle down and stay right here for

five minutes. And that's all the time I'll give it."

Because there's this tendency to tell yourself when you've got an hour to meditate, "Well, I'll just have a gradual kind of gliding down, the way a glider takes its time settling down, settling down and finally lands." Usually, we land just before the end of the hour. The mind lacks a sense of urgency.

So to give it more urgency, tell yourself, "You've got just five minutes. Settle down. And once it's down, you're going to stay right here." That develops a good habit. You don't wander around first, sniffing the flowers, looking at the birds, basically dawdling before you get to work.

Tell yourself, "Right now, settle down." You should know by now where your most comfortable spot is. So go right there. Try to observe what kind of breathing feels especially good. Once you've observed that, then keep applying that knowledge each time you sit. Right away, try to go right there as fast as you can. Then stay there.

There's a lot more to be learned from the meditation if you can settle down quickly, rather than just gradually gliding down and saying, "Oh, just as the mind was settling down, the bell rang."

Have a different mental picture of the hour. If part of the mind asks, "Do we have a half an hour left, fifteen minutes?" Say, "Don't ask, don't ask. It's totally irrelevant. You're here, right here, right now." As for your anticipations and assumptions of what's going to happen in the hour: Drop them all.

Totally give yourself to what you're doing right now. The more total your giving of yourself, the more likely that you actually will encounter something new. It may not be awakening but at least it's something new in the meditation: a possibility that you might not have previously conceived of.

Things can happen. Your duty's just trying to develop the conditions that allow these things to happen. So if you find that your anticipations are placing a limit on that, drop them. And don't hold back from giving your best.