

Wisdom Requires Integrity

November 26, 2014

Allow your mind to settle in with the breath. This means finding a place in the body where it's congenial to stay focused and a way of breathing that's congenial to settle on. What feels good for the body right now? Nobody else can tell you. You have to notice for yourself. And you have lots of choices. You can try long breathing, short breathing; fast, slow; heavy, light; deep, shallow; and all sorts of combinations of those factors. Play around with the breath. Get on familiar terms with it.

You want to be able to stay settled right here to see what's going on in the present moment—and particularly to see what your mind is doing, what choices it's making, where it's deciding to go, what it's deciding to think about, planning to say, planning to do. We want to see our actions, because our actions are the reasons why we suffer. To stop that suffering, we want to notice precisely which actions are the ones that cause the suffering, which ones can help lead away from suffering. That's where the discernment comes in.

Sometimes you hear that Buddhist wisdom is all about emptiness or non-duality. But you have to ask yourself: Are you suffering because you think things are dual? Are you suffering because you don't realize that things are empty?

Suppose you're attached to a flashlight. Why are you attached to the flashlight? Because you don't realize your oneness with the flashlight? That doesn't make any sense. Because you don't see the flashlight as empty of any underlying essence? That doesn't make any sense, either. You can have perceptions of being one and perceptions of emptiness, and yet still be attached to the flashlight.

You're attached because you see that it's worth being attached to. The effort that goes into the attachment is rewarded, and the reward is more than worth the effort of the attachment. That's how you see things. And the question is, where are you putting in effort that's not rewarded? Where are you putting in effort that's causing suffering that outweighs the benefits?

These questions are pretty basic—which is one of the reasons why, when real discernment comes, it's kind of embarrassing. You realize, "Oh my gosh, I've been doing this, and I knew better, and yet I was still going ahead and doing it anyhow again and again and again." When you see that, you know that you've seen at least something of that cause of suffering and have been able to let it go.

The cause is something right here, it's something you're doing in terms of your calculation of what's worth holding on to—how you compare the rewards with the drawbacks of holding on.

This is why we act in every case: We think it's going to be worth it. We take risks because we think it's worth it. We hold on to things, we let go of things because we think it's worth it. This is one of the basic functions of the mind.

To get past our miscalculations requires more than just a trick of perception. If it were

just a trick, that would reward trickiness. The kind of people who say, “I can get around this suffering by just switching my perception in this tricky way, by a little trick here, a little trick there, and not put in much effort”: You actually see that attitude in some practice communities.

But the Buddha's looking for something different. He's looking for your integrity: your willingness to admit your mistakes, and your decision that you've got to stop making those mistakes. Because you realize, you're not the only one who's suffering from these mistakes. Other people suffer, too.

This is why the teachings on emptiness that you find in the Canon basically grow out of the Buddha's teachings to Rahula, when Rahula was seven years old.

The Buddha said, “One, be truthful”—because you're going to have to see things about yourself that you're not going to like. And the only way to see them is to be honest with yourself.

Then, based on that honesty, you look at your intentions before you do anything and ask yourself, “What do you expect to come about as a result?” If you anticipate any harm to yourself or others, you don't do it. Harm to yourself, here, means breaking the precepts. Harm to others means getting them to break precepts. If you anticipate harm, don't do it. If you don't anticipate harm, go ahead. But while you're doing it, check to see if you're creating any harm. If you are, stop. If you aren't—or at least you can't see any harm—keep on with the act till it's done.

Then when it's done, you reflect on the long-term consequences. If you see that you actually did cause harm, talk it over with somebody who's more advanced on the path, so that you can get an idea of how not to repeat that mistake the next time around. And particularly be honest in your resolve to admit, “Yes, I did that. And I don't want to do it again. And I'm willing to put up with the embarrassment of telling someone about my mistakes.” That's what integrity means.

If you see that you didn't harm anybody, take joy in the fact that you're progressing on the path. Then keep on trying to progress even more.

The Buddha told Rahula to apply this principle not only to his physical actions but also to his words and even to his thoughts. And this is where it gets applied to meditation.

In another sutta, the Buddha talks about what he calls an entry into or an alighting on emptiness. Basically, this means getting the mind into a state of concentration and appreciating, “Okay, now that the mind has settled down, it's empty of a lot of the thoughts, concerns, and burdens it had before.” But then you ask yourself, “Is there still any sense of being disturbed by anything?” Here we're not talking about being disturbed by the sound of the dog or the sound of the crickets. We're talking about being disturbed by perceptions in your mind, and in particular by the perceptions or activities that are an integral part of that stage of concentration. This means that, to get past that disturbance, you're going to have to let go of that perception to move to a deeper stage of concentration.

As in the instructions to Rahula, you're looking at what you're doing, gauging the

results and seeing, “Is it really worth it? Is there anything in here that’s still weighing on the mind?” The Buddha sets up as a standard for the goal of this practice that it is possible to find a happiness that doesn’t have any sense of burden or any sense of being disturbed at all. That’s a standard you hold to for finding greater and greater levels of happiness, greater and greater levels of well-being inside.

It all builds on this quality of truthfulness, taking a fair and steady gaze at your actions—because our actions are what we’re clinging to. When the Buddha talks about sensuality, it’s not that we’re attached to sensual objects. We’re attached to the fantasizing that we like to do around sensual pleasures. Take anticipation: You can anticipate a meal for hours. The meal takes only a few minutes. Then afterwards you can embroider on what a great meal it was. That’s the kind of stuff we’re attached to. Because if you actually look at the experience of eating, there’s some pleasure there but it’s not all that great. So we have to dress it up for ourselves in order to keep on coming back, coming back, coming back. We get really attached to the dressing up. So many of our attachments are basically addictions to a certain kind of action. It requires integrity to see that.

So we’re not here trying to succeed in a little trick in perception, a little shift of perception, that can get us out of suffering without much work, or without changing our behavior in major ways. It takes work and it takes integrity to look at your actions and to catch yourself doing things you never noticed yourself doing before. And to work at changing what needs to be changed.

That’s one of the reasons we try to get the mind really solidly in concentration. Only when the mind is very, very still can the little actions of the mind become apparent. But it’s the same principle all the way through. Be honest with yourself about what you’re doing and what the results are. If the results aren’t up to standard—and you try to make sure your standards are high—then you realize you’ve got to change. That’s the element of integrity here.

It’s all motivated by compassion. Compassion for yourself: You don’t want to harm yourself. Compassion for others: You don’t want to harm them, either. But for compassion to be more than a nice sentiment, it has to be bolstered by the integrity of admitting your mistakes to yourself and putting in the effort to try to change the way you act.

That’s how we get beyond suffering, stress, disturbance—all the greater and lesser forms of dukkha that weigh down the mind.