

The Mirror Inside

March 30, 2023

There's a passage where the Buddha says, "Let an observant person come who is honest and no deceiver, and I'll teach that person the Dhamma." It's interesting that those are the qualities he looked for in a student. They have to do with your ability to observe yourself. You observe your actions, and you report them truly as to whether they're good actions or bad actions. You report them to yourself, and if necessary you report them to other people. That's the beginning of the Dhamma right there.

When the Buddha taught Rahula, one of the first images he used was a mirror: You look into the mirror to observe yourself. In the same way, you look at your actions. You pass judgment on them.

You start with your intentions: "This intention, if I follow through with it, will it harm anybody?" If it would, you don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, you go ahead. You're working with your best intentions, and then seeing how good your best intentions are, where they can be improved.

Because that's the next stage: You actually act on them, and you observe the results of your actions. If you see any harm coming up, you stop. If you don't see any harm, you can continue.

Then you look at the long-term results of the action. If there was any harm, you decide not to do it again, and you go talk it over with someone else who's more advanced on the path—to get their ideas, take advantage of their knowledge and experience.

And also, to be truthful again, to be honest again. Because there is that tendency: If you start hiding things from other people, you start hiding them from yourself. And if you start hiding things from yourself inside, there's a lot you're not going to see. Things go underground and they don't get trained.

But if you see that you didn't cause any harm, then you take joy in that fact, and encourage yourself to make further progress on the path.

That's how you develop your powers of observation and your honesty. You give them focus—you focus on your actions. This has to do with not only actions of the body, but also actions of speech and actions of the mind.

Like right now as we're meditating, we're engaged in actions of the mind, and you want to observe these, too: What are you doing right now? When the Buddha talks about developing mindfulness, he says that you want to be ardent, alert, and mindful. *Mindful* is remembering what to do, and *alert* is watching

what you're actually doing. Here again, the mirror comes in. You judge what you're doing against what you're mindful that you were trying to do—and decide what needs to be done to improve.

That's all part of ardency. Ardency, of those three qualities, is the beginning of wisdom. But it depends on mindfulness and alertness as well. You see something that needs to be improved, and you try to improve it. You see something that needs to be maintained, you try to maintain it.

So, right now as you're working with the breath, how's it going? Does it feel comfortable? If it doesn't feel comfortable, what changes would be better? Would it be better to be longer or shorter? Faster, slower? Heavier, lighter? Deeper, more shallow?

This is an area where you can experiment. It's one of the nice things about concentration practice: The purpose is to create a sense of well-being. Some people don't like the word *concentration* because it sounds too tense, but it's precisely the quality that you're trying to develop: You give the mind a center, and everything you're doing is gathered around that center. And it's stable. It builds on the quality of calm—the Pali term is *passaddhi*—but concentration goes deeper and is more solid than just calm. It's really stable, steady, centered.

To get it there, you have to observe how well you're settling in with the breath, and what needs to be improved. Do the improvements have to be in the breath or in the mind? Improvements in the mind would require stepping back for a bit and asking yourself, "Okay, what moods in the mind are getting in the way?" You sometimes carry in moods from the day, so what can you do to counteract those moods?

This is why the Buddha didn't teach just breath meditation. He taught all kinds of meditation topics that are good for getting the mind to settle in, getting it to let go at least temporarily of the unskillful things that are weighing it down.

Think thoughts of goodwill: goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others. Or think about taking the body apart in your imagination—all the different parts inside. If you're having a problem with lust or sensual desire, okay, take this apart to see: What is there that's really worth lust for? You realize that lust has very little to do with the actual object. It has *a lot* to do with the mind—the mind's desire to have something to desire. That's one of the strange qualities of the mind. Sometimes it has desire for desire's sake, not for the sake of any particular object. Look into that.

You can see these things only if you're reflective, if you're alert to watching what's going on and making an effort to do it well. Because you can watch what's

going on and just say, “Well, that’s the way things are. I’ll accept it,” but you don’t *learn* anything that way.

Ideally, you accept what you are as a fact that then can be built on: That’s the role of acceptance in the meditation. There are potentials in the present moment: The mind has potentials; the body has potentials. They don’t just sit there, they get provoked—and they can be provoked in a good way or a bad way.

The breath is the easiest potential to work with, so that’s why we start with it. We adjust it to see what potentials there are in the breath. As the Buddha said, when the mind settles down with the breath, there can be a strong sense of pleasure, a strong sense of rapture or refreshment. That potential is there in the breath someplace—in the quality of the breath energy in the body.

So, keep that possibility in mind. This is an important principle in the meditation: You’re not just observing what’s there. You’re also keeping in mind certain possibilities.

This is part of mindfulness—you remember lessons that you’ve learned, starting with the fact that there’s somebody who, 2,600 years ago, gained awakening watching the breath, so this must be a good thing. He talks about the potentials of rapture and pleasure in the breath, so they must be there someplace. Keep that in mind. There are more potentials here, more possibilities here than you would have imagined on your own.

This is where mindfulness and alertness and ardency move into the factors of *jhāna* or right concentration. Directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation—everything is gathered around that one center. But still, you’re observing. That’s what the evaluation is for. You notice how the breath is going, how it could go better. Or if it’s as good as it can get, how to maintain it. You do this by experimenting and then looking at the results to decide what can be improved, what’s working, what’s not working—again, the mirror.

The same principles that the Buddha taught to Rahula start getting applied to the meditation. You begin to realize, as the mind settles down, that some of the thoughts that used to harass it or weigh it down are far away for the time being. They may not be totally cut off, but they’re not really making any impingement on your awareness. So you appreciate that fact. A lot of concentration comes in learning how to appreciate it.

Because there is that problem that once the mind settles down and is really still, not much is happening, and part of the mind can get bored. So to counteract that, you have to realize, okay, the fact that the mind is just sitting here, it’s a lot lighter than it was when it was thinking about other things. There’s a sense of well-being that comes naturally as the mind settles in—you appreciate that.

Then you ask yourself, “Okay, is there still a disturbance in here? What am I doing to cause that disturbance?” This is an important part of being observant.

There are a lot of things you could observe in the world right now. You could observe the fact that the helicopter is coming, you could observe that fact that it’s awfully wet outside, but what does that accomplish?

I was just listening yesterday to a French Dhamma teacher saying that mindfulness is all about just being totally present to everything that’s coming into your senses all at once. Well, what’s coming into your senses all at once is not causing you to suffer. What’s causing you to suffer is *your own actions*, which is why the Buddha says to focus there—on what you’re doing. Be alert to what you’re doing.

When engaged in evaluation—*vicāra*—you’re evaluating your actions. When you’re moving into what the Buddha calls emptiness as an attitude, and you’re trying to see where the disturbances are in your meditation, you don’t blame the sounds outside or the pains in the body; you look for what the mind is doing right now.

As Ajaan Chah says, it’s not that the sounds are disturbing you. You’re disturbing the sounds! In other words, you’re engaged in a commentary on the sounds, and the same with your pains. The pains are not there trying to destroy your concentration, you’re the one who’s running a commentary on the pains. That’s what’s disturbing your concentration, so that’s what you want to look at. “What am I doing that’s weighing the mind down, and how can I stop?”

That’s the whole message of the four noble truths, which is why the Buddha started his discussions on the Dhamma with the image of the mirror. You’re reflecting to see that the suffering that’s weighing the mind down is not coming from anywhere else, it’s coming from inside. And the path to the end of that suffering comes from inside as well. So that’s where you have to look.

And you’re going to perfect that path how? You can’t take your path out and measure it against the Buddha’s path. You can measure it in the words, but you can’t see what the Buddha actually did. You’re taking the words and you’re trying to translate them into what you’re doing right now, and then you have to ask yourself, “Does this seem to be working? Does it seem to be heading in the right direction?”

So a lot of this is simply feeling your way. Tell yourself, “If something’s not working, it must not be right. Let’s go back and check it again.”

I’ve told you the story about Ajaan Fuang saying that when he started out meditating he didn’t have the advantages we have with all these books on how to meditate. He was just told, “Okay, get your mind to settle down.” So he kept

thinking: “down, down, down, down, down, down...” And the mind got really heavy. He finally realized, “This must not be right.” So he decided to compensate, “Well, how about up, up, up, up, up?” He brought his mind up, but then it got too scattered. So he figured, “Well, there must be a just-right in here someplace.”

So go on that assumption: The Buddha must have taught something right. If things are not going right in your meditation, either you’re not in line with what you were taught, or you misunderstood what you were taught. So you have to go back and check things.

This is how you make progress: assuming that there *must* be a way out. The Buddha said it lies around in here someplace, so you keep looking and looking and looking in here. As long as you have that assumption—there is a way out, and you can find it—you’re going to find it at some point.

But it’s going to take a lot of reflection. Just make sure your reflection is focused on what you’re doing. Concentration is maintaining that focus. Discernment lies in seeing how well you’re doing it. It’s very closely related to evaluation. In fact, Ajaan Lee says that that’s the discernment part of concentration practice: the evaluation.

There’ll be times when the mind can put down the evaluation and simply rest, but even as you go through the higher jhanas, there’ll be moments of evaluation when you realize, “Okay, the mind is settled down, but there’s still some disturbance in here. What is the disturbance? What am I doing?”

You have to *think* about that, observe. You notice that when you do *this*, the level of stress goes up; when you stop doing it, the level of stress goes down. If that’s the case, learn how to stop. Then rest with that quieter state until your sensitivities develop and you can see, “Hey, there’s still some disturbance *here*,” and you go through the same process again.

So, the practice is all of a piece: You commit yourself, you reflect, and you commit yourself some more. It’s a back-and-forth between *doing* and *observing*. That’s how you feel your way, so that the meditator inside gets trained, and the teacher who teaches the meditator inside gets trained as well—in how to be *really* honest and *really* observant.

These qualities start out as ordinary qualities. As Ajaan Maha Boowa says, “Mindfulness turns into *great* mindfulness. Discernment turns into *great* discernment.” In the same way, these ordinary qualities can yield extraordinary results if you really develop them.