

## *Observe Yourself in Action*

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As you sit here meditating it's important that you learn how to step back from your thoughts. You're giving yourself one thing to think about—the breath—and you then have to watch to see how well you're doing that. If any other thought comes up, you have to be careful not to go into it. This habit we have of going into our thoughts: The Buddha calls that becoming.

Something appears, it looks interesting, and there's a little world that goes along with that. Then you go into that world, and it can take you to all kinds of places. As Ajaan Suwat used to say, "Our becomings are the places we travel in."

The world could be this human world right now, or it could be a world of the past, a world of the future, other levels of being, other places. You have to make sure that while you're here you don't go into those worlds. So you're stepping back from a process that you tend to do all the time. We go from one world to the next in the same way you might hop from one train to another to another, to another and end up in Saskatchewan, wondering how you got there.

Here you're trying to keep coming back, coming back. Developing this ability to step out of your worlds is going to be important: one, to keep you with the breath, so that you don't get involved in other worlds. Then, ultimately, as you establish this world—you here with the breath—as it gets more comfortable, your sense of the body gets more expansive. The breath calms down. Sometimes you can even go into formless states. You're right here, but your sense of the body begins to dissolve. The boundary between the outside and the inside dissolves away. It's as if you have a mist here, and then there's space between the mist droplets, and you can go into the space.

But whatever the state of concentration, eventually you're going to have to step back from the concentration, too, and start observing it. So it's good that you develop this ability to step back: to observe thought processes simply as thought processes, and not get involved in their worlds. The Buddha said this is how you get past the process of becoming. He said all the cravings that lead to suffering are those that lead to becoming, and that includes not only craving for sensuality and craving for becoming, but also craving for non-becoming, too.

In that case, you have a state of becoming and you want to see it destroyed.

But then a sense of you can gather around that desire for it to be destroyed, and that can become a source of a new becoming. So what are you going to do? Don't think about destroying any becomings you have. Think more about looking at the process: How does a becoming form? Even before there's a sense of I or me doing this in a particular world, there will be events in the mind. When we talk about them, they seem abstract because we're so used to talking in terms of becoming, but they're really pretty simple and immediate. There are events in the mind, and you can learn how to observe them directly simply as events from very early on.

Here you can get some help from what are called the four precepts or four virtues of purity. As you develop right action, right speech, and right livelihood, you learn how to observe yourself. But these four precepts or virtues of purity elaborate on that a little bit. They start with the virtues of the precepts themselves: For the monks it's the Pāṭimokkha; for laypeople it's the five and eight precepts. Then you learn how to observe yourself as you try to follow the precepts. This is a basic principle of insight.

As the Buddha said, you see that there are certain actions that you like to do, and they're going to give good results, so you do them—no problem. Certain actions that you don't like to do, and you see they give bad results, so you don't do them—no problem. The problems are the actions you like to do but give bad results in the long term, or the ones you don't like to do but give good results in the long term. There, he says, you have to exert an effort. You have to learn how to talk to yourself.

In other words, you have to pull out of your likes and dislikes. You see this with the precepts. You see this also with the second of the four principles, which is restraint of the senses. When we think about restraint, the image that comes to mind immediately is that they're going to put a blindfold over your eyes and earmuffs over your ears so that you can't see or hear—but that's not the case.

Think of restraining a horse. You don't blindfold the horse. If you notice that the horse is going off the path, you simply pull it back. If it's going too fast, you pull it back a little bit. In other words, you ask yourself: What are the consequences of what it's doing going to be? You want to make sure that it doesn't do something stupid. That's how restraint of the senses functions. What we don't like to hear, though, is that some of the ways we engage with our senses of sight, hearing, and so forth, can be pretty stupid.

But the process there is basically looking to see, when you look at something, why? What's

your purpose in looking? When you're listening—why? When you're smelling an aroma, when you're tasting a flavor—what are you going for? For most of us, we're going just for the pleasure that comes out of these things.

And we can elaborate a lot on that. That's what sensuality is all about. Sensuality is not the pleasures themselves, it's the mind's ability to plan for these things, elaborate on them, to take delight in them: the commentaries you run on the food you're eating, or the food you used to eat, or the food you're planning to eat.

You can embroider these pleasures, but if you really look at them, there's not much there. Food tastes good only for a little while in your mouth and then it's gone. It leaves you full for a little while and then it's gone. The actual pleasure, the actual contact itself, is not much. If our attitude is that this is the only way we're going to find happiness in the world, then okay, let's embroider it, let's make it more than it really is.

But the Buddha's reminding you there's another kind of happiness that goes beyond these things, but it gets obscured by the fact that you're getting fascinated with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas. So given the fact that there is a greater pleasure, a greater happiness that comes from not clinging to these things, you begin to realize that there are some drawbacks here, there are drawbacks to enjoying them. The pleasures can be there, as the Buddha said. Even for awakened people, things that are beautiful are beautiful. The Canon has poetry about the beauties of nature, the beauties of wild nature, which was unusual back in those days. Most people, when they talked about beauties of nature, would talk about domesticated nature.

But in the Pali Canon, we seem to have the oldest wilderness poetry of all. We even have Ven. MahaKassapa, who was one of the Buddha's strictest disciples, talking about the beauties of being out in the mountains surrounded by waterfalls, rivers, and forests because it's a good place to get the mind to settle down. There are some pleasures that are really good for the practice.

And how do you know? You notice the effect they have on your mind. Here again, we're looking at things in terms of cause and effect: not so much at what you like and don't like, but where the enjoyment of a particular pleasure actually leads you. Where is it coming from in the mind, and what does it lead you to do?

The same with the third principle, which is purity of livelihood. When you're making your livelihood, what impact does it have on your mind? Does your livelihood involve harming any

beings? If so, it's going to have a bad impact. Does it involve aggravating your greed, aversion, and delusion? If so, maybe you should look for another livelihood. But again, you're looking at what you're doing by stepping back. You're not saying, "Well, just because I've identified myself as someone who does this livelihood, I'm going to stick with it." You pull back to see: "This is the role I've assumed: Is this a good role for me?"

It's a question a lot of people are afraid to ask for fear they're going to have to change their livelihood. But if they see they're actually doing harm, they're better off changing their livelihood even if it involves some hardship.

Then there's the fourth principle of purity, which is reflecting on the requisites. In other words, when you eat, ask yourself, "Why am I eating?" When you put on your clothing, "What purpose does this clothing serve?" It would seem simple enough, but then you look at the way people actually buy clothing, what they buy it for: Usually it's more than just to protect the body. There are a lot of other agendas going on.

The same with food: Basically the Buddha says we should eat to have enough strength to practice, to keep the body healthy. Anything more than that—if you're eating for the flavor, or just for the fun of it—you have to remember: Food comes with a price, and not just the monetary price. Think of all the suffering that people go through even if they're providing you with vegan or vegetarian food: the people who have to grow the food, transport it, cook it, clean up. There's a lot of work that goes into this.

And here we are, born into this world where we need food, automatically placing a burden on others. So you want to make that burden as light as possible.

The same with shelter: You need just enough shelter to protect you from the elements, just enough medicine to make sure you stay healthy, so that the body can function, and that should be enough. Anything more than that, you're taking on more debts than you really need.

In each of these cases, you're looking at your ordinary daily activities and you're beginning to see where in the mind these activities come from, and what impact they have on the mind when you engage in them. That ability to step back is going to serve you well—not only through concentration practice, but also in gaining insight.

Remember, the Buddha said he got onto the path by dividing his thoughts into two types—and it wasn't a question of whether he liked them or not. It was a question of what mental attitude they came from, and also where they would lead, what kind of activities they would inspire in you. If something would lead to activities that would harm you or harm other people,

you would have to say no.

So he basically came down with the principles of right resolve: to resolve on renunciation, which is basically not feeding off of thoughts of sensuality; non-ill will; and harmlessness. In other words, goodwill, compassion: Those, he decided, should be his motive forces as he acted.

There's another passage where he talks about how he got started on the path in a different way. This was a case where he realized that he needed to get the mind into concentration, and that it would involve putting sensuality aside —thoughts that are fascinated with the pleasures of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. As he said, his heart didn't leap up at the idea. But he stopped to consider: If he could get past that fascination, his mind could settle down. There would be a great sense of peace coming from the pleasure and even the rapture came with the concentration: pleasure and rapture that were totally blameless, that didn't have to depend on things outside being a certain way.

So in both cases, one, it was a matter of stepping back and watching his mind from the outside to see the pattern of cause and effect. And then two, the primary issue was going to be sensuality. It was because he was able to step back that he was able to get over the mind's resistance to settling down in something that had no involvement with sensuality at all, but would give a sense of well-being.

It's not as if we're here depriving ourselves all the time. The Jains used to accuse the Buddhist monks of being sensualists because they were enjoying the pleasure of *jhāna*. Well, yes, they were enjoying it, but it's not a sensual pleasure even though you're filling the body with good energy. There can be a strong sense of rapture, but it doesn't count as a sensual pleasure. It's a pleasure of form, and that doesn't have the drawbacks of sensuality.

So this ability to step back and watch cause and effect in your mind in terms of your actions: That's what allows you to get into concentration.

The same with the discernment: You can step back from your concentration, and begin to see the things that go into making it up.

This is where you get into dependent co-arising. We look at the list, and it seems awfully abstract, but it's actually something very near to what's going on right in our present awareness.

You see this clearly when you're looking at your concentration. The first factor after ignorance is fabrication: bodily fabrication—which is the in-and-out breath; verbal fabrication—directed thought and evaluation, how you're talking to yourself; and mental fabrication—feelings and perceptions. Feelings are feeling tones of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain.

Perceptions are the images you hold in mind, the labels you apply to things.

You have these things right here as you're meditating. You're focused on the breath and talking to yourself about the breath. You have images that you hold in mind about how the breath flows through the body. And of course, there are the feeling tones. In fact, the feeling tones are how the states of *jhāna* are defined.

That's just one of the links, one of the more important links, in dependent co-arising, but if you get started with this link, your insights spread to the other ones as well. The important thing is that you learn how to see your own mind in terms of cause and effect. You realize that thoughts can come into the mind, and you don't have to build a sense of *you* around them. You don't have to build a sense of the world around them. Just look at cause and effect: What happens as a result? Where do they come from? Where do they lead?

You learn this talent through the precepts. Or even further back, you learn this talent as you began to observe yourself as you were giving a gift and asked yourself the question, "What kind of gift can I give that gives rise to the greatest sense of well-being?" You began to notice that there were certain attitudes you would bring to a gift that were better than others. There was also your choice of a gift, your choice of who to give the gift to, how you talked about it to yourself beforehand, during, and after.

We're basically here to observe ourselves in action. This is a principle that applies all the way through.

So, as you go through the day and exercise a little restraint over your senses, remind yourself, okay, this is an important skill you need to develop. The Buddha's not trying to be a killjoy, telling you not to enjoy the pleasures of the senses. There are pleasures there that are perfectly innocent, that don't have a bad impact on the mind at all. It's the ones where you constantly talk to yourself about them: Those are the ones you've got to watch out for.

As you're exercising restraint over the senses, it's also good to have a solid basis with the breath, because a lot of our desire to go running after the pleasures of the senses is because we feel empty inside. We want something to fill up the emptiness. Whereas if you have this sense of the breath filling the body—comfortable, at ease, refreshing—you don't feel so pulled into inner conversations about pleasures outside. You can learn how to step back from them.

So largely, it's a matter of *where* you're going to look for your happiness. And the Buddha's basically saying that there is this higher happiness. Look in the third noble truth: If you let go of your passion, you let go of your craving, he said it leads to the ultimate happiness.

So *there's* the ultimate happiness that's promised.

If we didn't have that promise, you'd have to say, "Well, whatever pleasures I can get, I'll just go for them because that's all there is." But that's *not* all there is. That's what the message of the four noble truths is all about. There is an ultimate happiness, and we can get there by learning how to observe ourselves in action, letting go of the pleasures that get in the way of the higher ones.

So when you're exercising restraint over the senses, when you're observing the precepts, when you're being careful about your livelihood, when you reflect on your requisites and take only what you need—don't think of it as deprivation. You're making a trade—and you're trading up. But it does require that you pull back and watch and learn to see things in terms of cause and effect.

That's how you get past the causes of suffering, and the mind can open up to something more than you can imagine.