

## *For What It's Worth*

*October 4, 2023*

We focus on the breath to train the heart and the mind. In Pali they use one word, *citta*, to cover both what we mean by heart and mind. The mind is the calculating part, the part that reasons, takes things apart, tries to understand them. The heart is the part that wants true happiness, that wishes well, the good heart—and you're trying to create a good mind as well. In fact, that's an important principle in learning how to observe the mind. Train it to be good first. Train the heart to be good. Then it's a lot easier to observe it.

We're observing it for two reasons: one, to see what it's doing, and then two, to see the worth of what it's doing. As the Buddha pointed out, some of the things we do lead to suffering, some of the things we do could lead to the end of suffering. There's an obvious value judgment there. We don't just say, "Well, isn't it interesting that this action leads to suffering, whereas that one doesn't." We're going to take advantage of that knowledge so that we can focus on abandoning the actions that lead to suffering and developing the ones that lead away.

This is why meditation doesn't just float in mid-air. It's based on acts of generosity, acts of virtue. When you train the mind to be generous and virtuous, it's a lot easier to watch. If you've been dishonest about things, lazy about things, harmful in your behavior, it's very easy to put up walls of denial. And when you've got walls of denial, how are you going to see anything?

This is why the Buddha said that right mindfulness is based on right view but also on virtue. It takes a certain goodness that you develop in the mind to be able to remember things, because you don't have to put up walls. You can reflect on your actions, and it gives rise to a sense of well-being.

This, the Buddha said, is an important part of getting the mind into concentration. Sometimes we think that we get the mind into concentration to get the well-being. But he says that there also has to be some well-being first, a sense of gladness. This can be created by reflecting on your virtue, reflecting on your generosity, living in a harmonious community. By reflecting on that, the mind feels ease, it feels joy, has a sense of self-worth, a sense of its own fortunate circumstances, and it's a lot easier for the mind then to settle down.

There will be times when it's hard to get the mind to stay with the breath. It seems to be wandering off to other places, and it's easy to get discouraged. If the narrative of your life leading up to the meditation is not all that good, then this just becomes one more part of that bad narrative: that you can't get it together,

you can't do this right. But if you're coming with a sense of well-being, a sense of competence and confidence, then it's easy to take these difficulties in stride. You fall down, you pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and keep going. Fall down again? Don't get discouraged. Pick yourself up. Keep going. That's an attitude you can develop best by developing a generous heart, a virtuous heart. And as things begin to come together, this is one of the best ways to observe the mind in action: watching it do something right.

Of course, the fact that the mind is more and more still makes it easier to see things clearly. You need the stillness, but you also need the quality of discernment, watching yourself in action so that you can judge what's worth doing and what's not.

So you have stillness, mindfulness, alertness: These are the things that make you a reliable judge. After all, a lot of the insights, when they come along, don't come with a certification that this has passed the test for other people. You have to be able to judge when the mind sees something: How reliable is its vision? Of course, it gets more and more reliable as you practice, but it requires a constant reflection.

The other way you see the mind in action, of course, is, once you've got it still, you try to maintain the stillness. In maintaining it, you'll run into other thoughts, other intentions, and you want to learn how to see how they form. In the beginning, you're sitting here with the breath, and then, not knowing what happened, you're someplace else. The mind just blinded itself, created a big blank. So you have to realize, the next time you get the mind still, that you want to maintain that stillness and be on the lookout for when a thought may begin, because it begins very subtly.

Sometimes the mind has a tendency even to lie to itself. Think of the mind as a committee. Some of the committee members have decided they want to slip away as soon as your mindfulness lapses. They're all ready to go. There's a lapse, and they're gone. You want to see that point where they made up their decision to be ready to go.

Scientists have done psychological experiments where they can determine by brain waves that someone has made a decision. Yet the person they're studying doesn't realize that the decision has been made. The scientists claim that this is proof that the brain is making the decision without your interference. You're just sitting on the receiving end. But what it's actually proof of is our mind's ability to hide things from itself.

The more stillness you can bring in the mind, the more you're ready to see the distractions as they form, and the earlier you can catch them in the process. You

begin to see there's a little stirring. It's hard to say whether it's in the breath or in the mind. It's on the borderline between the two. Then you can identify it as a physical stirring, which you can just breathe through, or as mental one. It has a meaning. You slap a perception on it and say, "This is a thought about  $x$ , about the future, about the past, whatever." Then you go with it. You start weaving things around it.

So you're trying to catch that process earlier and earlier. And the way to do that is, as soon as you've noticed that you've wandered off, you drop whatever the thought is. You don't have to finish it. You can leave the ends dangling. But make up your mind you're not going to try to peer into it and see, "Well, how far can this thought go?" before you go back to the breath. Just drop it, drop it, drop it.

For the time being, thoughts of that sort have no worth at all. They may have worth in terms of the world outside, but for the time being you're putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That's what the texts say. So those thoughts have no meaning, no worth. When you can regard them that way, then you can see more clearly what's happening in the mind.

The best thing of all is when you start seeing how the mind has deceived itself, but now you're not taken in by the deception. The part that really hurts, of course, is knowing that there are times when not only does the mind try to deceive itself, but it *likes* to go along with the deception. But here you're changing your values as you get better and better at noticing what's coming out of the mind.

This way, when the Dhamma eye arises—in other words, the point of stream-entry—you've been seeing how you fabricate distracting thoughts and you've been seeing how you can fabricate very subtle states of concentration, so your sensitivity to fabrication is more and more acute. The mind reaches a point where it has no fabrication in the present moment at all, and all the six senses fall apart. You have an experience of the deathless and you *know* that's what it is because you've become so sensitive to what the mind has been doing all along.

That's why it's expressed as, "Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation." You've found something that's not subject to origination, and it doesn't cease. Your honesty and your sensitivity together allow you to see that, to pass that judgment, and to trust that judgment. And that's just the first level of awakening. As the mind progresses, it gets better and better at observing itself and observing which actions are worthwhile, which ones are not. After all, insight is a value judgment. As you see what's originated in the mind, you see how it passes away, and you see what the allure is, why you go with that kind of fabrication. Then you look for the drawbacks, and if the allure seems greater than the drawbacks, you're not going to let it go.

But when you see that the drawbacks are greater, then you ask, “Why continue with this? It’s not worth it, a waste of energy, a waste of time.” That’s when you develop dispassion for it and can escape.

So again, you need to see the mind in action, both to understand exactly what’s going on—that’s the mind part—and to allow the heart part to ask, “Is this worth it?” The activity that goes into getting concentrated *is* worth it for the time being. But as the mind gets more and more sensitive and your heart gets more and more sensitive, there comes a point when you say, “No, it’s not.” That’s when you look for the way out.

So you’re trying to see things as they’re happening, instead of just seeing things as they are. The Pali term—*yatha-bhuta-ñāna-dassana*—actually means knowing and seeing things as they’ve come to be, the process by which they’ve come to be. Then you have that value judgment: Is it worth it? Is it not? Dispassion, after all, which the Buddha said is the highest dhamma, is a value judgment that these things are not worth the effort that goes into them. That’s how you get out.

As for the question of how you know when you’ve reached a state that doesn’t die, you know because you’ve trained yourself to be a good observer. You can get the mind still so that you can see subtle things, making it honest, and having a strong sense of goodwill for yourself, really wanting to do what’s for your best interests.

That’s how you know that your observations are reliable—and that they’ve taken you where you want to go.