

The Grain of the Wood

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The Buddha teaches that there are two sides to the path of practice: the side of developing and the side of letting go. And it's important that you see the practice in both perspectives, that your practice contains both sides. If you practice just letting go, you'll throw away the baby with the bath water. Everything good will get thrown out because you let go of everything and leave nothing left. On the other hand, if yours is just a practice of developing and working and doing, you miss the things that happen on their own, that happen when you do let go.

So an important part of the practice is realizing which is which. This is what discernment is all about, realizing which qualities in the mind are skillful, the ones that are your friends, and which qualities are unskillful, the ones that are your enemies. The ones that are your friends are those that help make your knowledge clearer, make you see things more clearly — things like mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, together with the qualities they depend on: virtue, morality, persistence. These are the good guys in the mind. These are the ones you have to nurture, the ones you have to work at. If you don't work at them, they won't come on their own.

Some people think that practice is simply a matter of letting the mind go with its own flow, but the flow of the mind tends to flow down, just as water flows downhill, which is why the mind needs to be trained. In training the mind, we're not creating the unconditioned or unfabricated in the mind. It's more like polishing wood. The grain is already there in the wood but, unless you polish it, it doesn't shimmer, it doesn't shine. If you want to see the beauty of the grain, you have to polish it, to work at it. You don't create the grain, but the polishing is what brings out the grain already there. If you don't polish it, it doesn't have the same shimmer, it doesn't have the same beauty as it does when it's polished.

So practicing the Buddha's path is like polishing away at the mind to see what's of real value there within the mind. That's what the mindfulness, the persistence, the ardency, and all the other terms the Buddha uses that suggest effort and exertion: That's what they're for. This is why we have rules in the practice: rules in terms of the precepts, rules for the monks to follow. They

provide work for the mind, and it's good work. They're not just "make-work" rules. When you hold by the rules, when you hold by the precepts, the result is that you learn an awful lot about the mind at the same time you're making life a lot easier for yourself and the people around you. In the beginning it may seem harder to have the rules to follow, but once you start living by them, they open up all kinds of possibilities that weren't there before when everything was confined by the riverbanks of your old habits, going along with the flow.

This is why there has to be effort. This is why there has to be work in the practice. As the Buddha said, right effort has four sides. Abandoning is only one of the four. There's also preventing — preventing unskillful things from arising. When unskillful things have arisen, those are the things you abandon. Then there's the effort to give rise to skillful qualities, and the effort to maintain them once they are there. You develop these skillful qualities and then you keep them going so that they develop to higher and higher levels. So sometimes, when you're reflecting on your practice, it's useful to focus on exactly what you're developing here — the good qualities like mindfulness and alertness. At other times it's helpful to focus on the things you have to let go of, the things you have to work at preventing.

You see right effort very easily when doing concentration practice because you have to focus on where you want the mind to be, to be aware of where you don't want it to be, and also to be ready to fight off anything that's going to come in to disturb your stillness of mind. When you're focusing on your meditation topic, you pick it up and say that this is what you're going to focus on for the next hour. By doing this you're giving rise to skillful qualities. And then you try to keep your focus there. You've got to keep reminding yourself that this is what you're doing here. You're not just sitting; you're sitting here to develop the mind. So you keep your mind on the topic you've chosen, like the breath, and then you work at bringing the mind back whenever it slips off, bringing it here, keeping it here, at the same time being aware that any moment it can slip off again. This second level of awareness is what keeps you from drifting off obliviously and then coming back to the surface five minutes later, suddenly realizing that you were off who-knows-where in the mean time. If you're prepared for the fact that the mind can leave at any point, then you can watch for it. In other words, you're watching both the breath and the mind, looking for the first sign that it's going to leap off onto something else. This is a heightened level of awareness that allows you to see the subtle stirrings in the mind.

The mind is often like an inchworm standing at the edge of a leaf. Even though the inchworm's back feet may still be on this leaf, its front feet are up in the air, swaying around, searching around for another leaf to land on. As soon as that other leaf comes, *boomph*, it's off. And so it is with the mind. If you're not aware of the fact that it's getting ready to leave the breath, it comes as a real surprise when you realize that you've slipped off someplace else. But when you have a sense of when the mind is beginning to get a little bit antsy and ready to move, you can do something about it.

In other words, you can't be complacent in the practice. Even if the mind seems to be staying with the breath, sometimes it's ready to move on, and you've got to have that second level of awareness going as well so that you can be aware both of the breath and of the mind together — so that you have a sense of when the mind is snug with its object and when it's beginning to get a little bit loose. If you see it loosening its grip, do what you can to make it more snug. Is the breath uncomfortable? Could it be more comfortable? Could it be finer? Could it be longer, shorter, whatever? Explore it. The mind is telling you on its own that it isn't happy there anymore. It wants to move.

So look at the quality of the breath and then turn around and look at the quality of the mind — this sense of boredom, this wanting to move. What's actually causing it? Sometimes it comes from the breath, and sometimes it's just a trait that arises in the mind, a trait that stirs up trouble. Try to be sensitive to what's going on, to see whether the problem is coming from the mind or the object the mind is focused on. If it's coming from a simple sense of boredom that's moved in, let the boredom move on. You don't have to latch onto it. You don't have to identify with it, saying that it's *your* boredom. As soon as you identify with the boredom, the mind has left the breath and is on the boredom. Even though the breath may be there in the background, the boredom has come into the forefront. Your inchworm has moved off to the other leaf.

So if the mind is getting antsy and saying, "Well, move. Find something new," refuse for a while and see what happens. What is the strength lying behind that need to move? What's giving it power? Sometimes you'll find that it's actually a physical sensation someplace in the body that you've overlooked, so work on that. Other times it's more an attitude, the attitude that you picked up someplace that said, "Just sitting here not thinking about anything is the most stupid thing you can do. You aren't learning anything, you aren't picking up anything new. Your mind isn't being exercised." Ask yourself, "Where is that voice coming from?" It's coming from somebody who never meditated, who didn't understand all the good things that come from being still in the present

moment.

Only when the mind is really still right here can it begin to resonate with the body. When there's a resonance between the breath and the mind, it gives rise to a much greater sense of wholeness and oneness. This is the positive aspect of the practice that you want to focus on, because if the mind is one place and the body someplace else, there's no resonance. It's as if they were singing two completely different tunes. But if you get them together, it's like having one chord with lots of overtones. And then you come to appreciate how, when there's this sense of resonance between the body and mind, you begin to open up. You begin to see things in the mind and in the body that you didn't see before. It's healing for both the body and the mind. It's also eye-opening in the sense that the more subtle things that were there suddenly appear. You gain a sense of appreciation for this, that this is a very important thing to do with the mind. The mind needs this for its own sanity, for its own health.

So when the mind starts getting antsy and wants to move around and think about things and analyze things, and it starts telling you that you're stupid to sit here and not think, remind it that not everything has to be thought through, not everything has to be analyzed. Some things have to be experienced directly. When you analyze things, where does the analysis come from? It comes mostly from your old ignorant ways of thinking. And what we're doing as we get the mind to settle down is to put those ways of thinking and those ways of dividing up reality aside. For a state of concentration you want to get the mind together with the body and to foster a sense of oneness, a sense of resonance between the two.

Once they've had chance to be together, *then* you can begin to see how things begin to separate out on their own. And this is a totally different way of separating. It's not the kind of separating that comes from ordinary thinking. It's actually seeing that even though the body and mind are resonating, they are two separate things, like two tuning forks. You strike one tuning fork and put another one next to it. The second tuning fork picks up the resonance from the first one, but they're two separate forks. Once the body and mind have had a chance to resonate for a while, you begin to see that they are two separate things. Knowing is different from the object of knowing. The body is the object; the mind is the knowing. And this way, when they separate out, they don't separate out because you have some preconceived notion of how they should be. You watch it actually happening. It's a natural occurrence. It's like the grain of the wood: When you polish it, the grain appears, but not because you designed the grain. It's been there in the wood all along.

The same with your meditation: You're simply giving yourself a chance really to see your experience of body and mind for what it is instead of coming in with preconceived notions about how things should get divided up, how things should be analyzed. There's a natural separation line between name and form, body and mind. They come together, but they're separate things. When you learn how to allow them to separate out, that's when real discernment comes in.

This is why the discernment that comes with concentration is a special kind of discernment. It's not your ordinary mode of thinking. It comes from giving things a chance to settle down. Like a chemical mixture: If everything gets jostled around, the two chemicals are always mixed together and you can't tell that there are two in there. There seems to be just the one mixture. But if you let the mixture sit for a while, the chemicals will separate. The lighter one will rise to the top; the heavier one will settle to the bottom. You'll see at a glance that there actually are two separate chemicals there. They separate themselves out on their own because you've created the conditions that allow them to act on their own.

The same with the mind: A lot of things begin to separate out on their own if you simply give the mind a chance to be still enough and you're watchful enough. If you're not watchful, the stillness drifts off into drowsiness. So you need the mindfulness together with the stillness for this to happen properly.

With the stillness, you're letting go of a lot of nervous activity, you're letting go of a lot of unskillful things in the mind. With the mindfulness you're developing the skillful qualities you need to see clearly. This is how the letting-go and the knowing come together. When the Buddha discusses the four noble truths, he talks about the duty appropriate to each. Your duty with regard to craving, the second noble truth, is to let it go. Then there's a third noble truth, which is the cessation of suffering. And what is that? It's the letting-go of the craving at the same time you're aware of what's happening. So the task appropriate to the cessation of suffering is a double process: knowing together with the letting-go, and this makes all the difference in the world. Most of the time when we let go of craving we're not aware of what's happening, so it's nothing special. It's just the ordinary way of life as we move from one craving to another. But when the mind has been still enough, and the mindfulness well-developed enough, then when the craving gets abandoned you're aware of it as well, and this opens up something new in the mind.

This is why the factors of the noble eightfold path fall into two types: the ones that develop and the ones that let go. The ones that let go abandon all the

mind's unskillful activities that obscure knowledge. The developing ones are the ones that enable you to see clearly: right view, right mindfulness, right concentration. They all work at awareness, so that you can know clearly what's actually happening in the present moment.

So there are these two sides to the practice, and you want to make sure that you're engaged in both sides for your practice to be complete. It's not just a practice of relaxing and letting go, and it's not just a practice of staying up all night and meditating ten hours at a stretch, really pushing, pushing, pushing yourself. You have to find a balance between clear knowing and effort, a balance between developing and letting go, knowing which is which and how to get that balance just right. That's the skill of the practice. And when you have both sides of the practice perfectly balanced, they come together and are no longer separate. You've got the mind in a perfectly clear state where the knowing and the letting-go become almost the same thing.

But the balance doesn't occur without practice. You may ask, "Why do we keep practicing? When do we get to perform?" Well, we're practicing for the time when ultimately we can master these things. When the practice gets balanced, the path performs, and that's when things really open up in the mind.