

Being present

In the late 1960s, a well known mind scientist, Les Fehmi, did a series of experiments on training the mind to focus in the hope of enhancing the clarity and scope of information processing. After a series of twelve 2-hour sessions, trying out various meditation and related methods, he failed to obtain any sense of focus.

He resignedly sank back into his chair. Then something miraculous happened. Fortunately, he was still glued to his EEG. The readings began to show that he was in a dramatically relaxed “alpha” state! It was when he gave up on his task (and despite feeling a sense of frustration) that his mind began to relax!

This sounds very familiar for those of us who do Buddhist meditation. It is the art of letting go in the heart. What is that we need to let go off? Beginners in meditation often notice how thoughts begin to fill their minds. They lose focus when they follow these thoughts.

Such thoughts then begin to “proliferate”: they explode into countless streams and eddies of mental chatter, making us lose focus. Since these thoughts are mostly from the past, we lose touch of the present. The problem with this is that it dissipates our inner energies in countless ways, trying to think in many directions at the same time.

Sometimes we think of the future: what we are going to do next, and so on. And we are eager to just get up and do it, as it were. We become restless. These thoughts about the future are also influenced by the past. Our habitual ways of thinking push us in that direction.

We must simply remind ourselves that the future has not yet come. Notice even when the future has come, we will often do something other than what we had planned to do. We might even have forgotten what we had planned! So let us keep our attention in the present, where true reality is – in the breath.

The first step to returning to the present is to accept such thoughts for what they are: as an inseparable part of ourselves. Imagine they are like six young mischievous children or six lively little pets we have. They are simply lovely, and we show them our lovingkindness, and let them play just as they like.

But we are not going to join in their play, nor are we encouraging them in any way. We are going to keep our attention in the present moment, in the breath. Whenever the mind wanders off to one of these six little mischief-makers (one of our six sense-faculties), we gently, patiently but firmly bring it back to the breath.

The more we do this, the more our minds will listen to us. In a sense, this is easier than learning to drive a vehicle, and so much safer! In fact, we are learning to be a skillful inner driver of the heart.

Good meditation teaches us to stay in the present, the real centre of our lives. As our sense of the present becomes more focussed, we find it spilling over into our daily lives and enriching them. We begin to notice the present (and presence) in our daily lives, in our work, in the people we care for, in those we meet.

Being present by Piya Tan

We are now able to see them just as they are, but more deeply, with as little judgement or narrative as possible, or with none at all. We are able to embrace them, as it were, just as we would accept ourselves. The point is that no one enjoys being mean to others: if we are really happy we would not want to hurt others. We would be more embracing.

How often we see others as if we were still in the past. We judge them from how we think they were, so that they never are, and never will be. Relationships simply fail this way, even before they can begin. We too have to leave our past behind.

Let our fallen leaves be blown away by the gentle breezes of self-acceptance, or let them sink into the ground of our lives to enrich it. Let fresh new leaves grow on our trees, and shade us in mutual joy and safety.

Being present means to see our great potential for goodness. To be present with others means to accept and allow for their great potential for goodness. With this sort of unconditional acceptance of others, we might even be able to change their lives (and ours) for the better forever.

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