

GOT ATTITUDE

A few years ago I was in the midst of a difficult negotiation with local government, trying to resolve a long simmering stalemate. Things already weren't going my way when the leading official said to me, "You surely don't need me to remind you that life's unfair! You're old enough to know that!"

His rebuke set off a tsunami of emotion and reactivity in my mind. Embarrassment, humiliation, shame, and then indignation washed over me; then I saw the impulse to be angry with him arise and flood through my mind. After the thought that I was being disrespected, schemes, strategies, and thoughts of revenge and retaliation rushed to the surface. I felt tension in the body, self-consciousness in the mind. I longed to escape.

Fortunately, from thirty years of awareness and insight practice, I saw all these thoughts, feelings, and judgments. I knew from experience to simply wait until my mind arrived at the understanding, "This too can be dealt with." Settling down into a willingness to deal with the way things were, I was able to offer an acknowledgement of the truth of his statement and we continued on with the next item on the agenda.

Every one of us suffers when the blind reactivity of unskillful, habitual attitudes upsets our unstable mind. We want to be able to face challenging situations skillfully and have the awareness to recognize and sidestep unhelpful thoughts, feelings, judgments, and beliefs. Skillful attitudes of mind are the key to facing potentially explosive situations, and the ongoing highs and lows of life and practice.

Recognizing unskillful attitudes of mind and cultivating right attitudes is the foundation for all spiritual growth. By cultivating skillful attitudes of mind, we will gradually respond to more and more of life with awareness and wisdom. With steady awareness of the way things are, the perseverance to stay with that awareness, and the willingness to learn from it, we maximize our sense of well-being.

Acquiring such skillful attitudes involves developing two elements: continuity of awareness and insight knowledge. Stabilizing the mind and refining wisdom are the natural results of gradually developing and maturing faith, energy and awareness through insight practice. These five qualities together—stability of mind, refined wisdom, faith, energy, and awareness—are known as the controlling faculties of mind.

Faith (*saddha*)

Faith is a spiritual compass, pointing in the direction of our aspiration. Faith grows from inspiration, through exhilaration, to trust and empirically based unshakeable confidence. This gradually emerges as our practice purifies attachment, aversion, and delusion. As wisdom grows, the compass needle of our faith adjusts more precisely to re-align with increasingly wiser aspirations.

When I first started practice, I went on staff at IMS - a meditation center that had recently opened in Barre, Massachusetts—after an initial two-week intensive mindfulness retreat. On one of my first days on the job, I told another staff member with great enthusiasm, “I have no doubt that in this lifetime, I will realize the dharma!” Looking back, I am amazed both at my ignorance (I did not know what it meant “to realize the

dharma,” and had no idea yet what was involved in fulfilling it) and my unbridled confidence that insight practice would fulfill my aspiration.

Yet this type of exhilarating faith provides initial inspiration for our practice. However, it is also vulnerable to contamination by hidden hopes, expectations, ambitions, desires, assumptions, and illusions. Immature faith actually supports greed when unexamined beliefs place the mind in an imbalanced posture. The mind expects desired, pleasant, or imagined experiences, and hopes to avoid unpleasant feelings. These expectations prevent connecting with the present moment as it is, because our mind is fixed on how we want or imagine it to be.

In turn, this can undermine faith: When expectations are not met, disappointment is the result. As one student observed, “There’s nothing like a good sitting in the morning to ruin the rest of your day!” As we know, pleasant sittings can condition attachment and a sense of being entitled to pleasant meditations in the future. We keep looking for what we had or we try to make it happen again. It rarely works like that, and such striving leads to more suffering caused, as the Buddha reminds us, “because of visiting forces known as defilements.”

Or, if our hope for a great sitting is fulfilled, we become vulnerable to inflated pride and increased attachment to the agenda to “improve” our self through practice. We resist a self-image we disapprove of and become infatuated with a new and improved self-image that we prefer. Our faith may feel strong, but, really, awareness is being undermined by attachment to the excitement, anticipation, and expectation of fulfilled hopes. Attachment and aversion then both cloud the mind causing suffering.

How do we avoid misguided faith? We practice awareness with nonattachment. Seeing attachment, aversion, expectation, and disappointment as they arise allows the mind to understand and to disengage from them. Awareness of a defilement breaks the spell; the mind is no longer enchanted when we see the defilement for what it is. When a defilement has no hold on the mind, suffering ceases. Awareness can simply wait and observe the next present moment as it arises. These moments gradually refine faith and skillful wisdom increasingly arises in daily life.

Thus, mature, empirically based confidence and unshakeable faith develops as wisdom gradually increases and our suffering decreases. As Sayadaw U Tejaniya put it, “When your understanding of the true nature of things grows, your values in life will change. When your values change, your priorities change as well. Through such understanding, you will naturally practice more, and this will help you to do well in life.”

Energy (*viriya*)

Though Energy is a controlling faculty of insight, more effort does not equal more insight. It’s easy to try too hard and to rigorously apply skillful techniques, but insight is better supported by a gentle perseverance to continually show up for the present moment.

In my early years of practice as an ordained monk in Burma, my monastic schedule called for alternate hours of sitting and walking meditations from 3:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. with short breaks for two meals, bathing, and check-ins with my teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita. With my strong commitment to practice, I soon began increasing the

lengths of my sits until I was sitting for four hours or longer. This led to daily reports of the excruciating pain in the body. After a couple weeks, Sayadaw U Pandita asked me, “Do you know why you have so much pain?” Expecting deep understanding and secret teachings, I responded “No.” He replied, “Because you sit too long!”

In his “Manual of Insight,” Mahasi Sayadaw identifies the practices which serve to re-balance energy and re-boot the attitude when it veers off course in overly enthusiastic practice. Among the many manifestations of an over-zealous mind, Mahasi Sayadaw lists many of my experiences: “determination to not to miss anything, checking every missed experience, clenching the jaw, gritting the teeth, clenching the hands into fists.” In my eagerness to become proficient in the technique, I had mistaken effort for understanding, and had seen neither my agenda nor my attachment.

There are many skillful techniques for dealing with challenging meditation experiences. Bowing, labeling, sitting straighter, opening the eyes, silently chanting, cultivating loving thoughts, offering forgiveness, returning to the primary object, can all be useful for dealing with difficult states of mind. However, each of these techniques can be used with inappropriate effort. Further, while it is tempting to rely on and become proficient in many techniques, these same skills can lead to missing the present experience. Now I notice that, when I’m about to resort to any technique, I’ve missed the prior moment that conditioned the impulse to shift to that technique. Not seeing the arising of an unpleasant mental state sets in motion a chain of causal conditioning that links unpleasant to aversion, aversion to intention, intention to application of a well-learned (and now habitual) technique. This occurs without awareness having noticed, or wisdom having understood the process. This journey of discovery we are on depends on

seeing and understanding these unconscious links of conditioning, which can only be done with balanced energy and continuous awareness, not by perfecting a technique.

As Sayadaw U Tejaniya has said, “It is not difficult to be aware. It is difficult to maintain it continuously. For this you need right effort, which is simply perseverance.” Perseverance is the willingness to show up for whatever arises in the body, mind, or environment. This then develops into continuity of awareness that reveals understanding of the ways, means, and end of conditioning.

Awareness (*sati*)

Isn't it amazing how the mind can wander, lost in thought, with no awareness of what we are thinking? Yet when awareness arises, the train of associated thoughts stops and a moment of relief occurs before the mind picks up another object. In a moment of reflection we can reconstruct the whole sequence of thoughts that just occurred without our having been aware of them at the time they were occurring. The mind knew, but we were unaware of what the mind knew.

Awareness is a natural capacity of the mind. It happens due to conditions. When conditions arise, awareness happens. When those conditions do not arise, delusion happens. Learning to recognize the conditions that give rise to each of these mental states helps us understand the conditional nature of all experience. With this knowledge and understanding, awareness can be encouraged and strengthened. Delusion can be recognized and abandoned.

It takes practice to be aware of what the mind knows. We are not trying to stop the mind from knowing, but rather to be aware of these three things: 1) what the mind is already knowing, 2) the nature of our relationship to it, and 3) we can also be aware of the fact of knowing. It is important to know what the mind is doing. If anger arises: Is the mind feeling angry? Is it thinking about anger? Or is it being aware of anger? The difference between these states reflects the difference between being absorbed and entangled in the feeling of the experience, being caught in the dreamlike story of the experience, or clearly observing and understanding the nature of both anger and awareness.

Just as awareness is a natural activity of mind, so too feeling, perceiving, and cognizing are natural, impersonal activities of mind. In turn, they condition judging, liking, disliking, explaining, strategizing, and rehearsing. While these are all natural activities of mind—meaning they appear due to causes and conditions—these secondary activities of mind enhance the sense of self even as they ensnare it into identifying with the content of thoughts. Deeply habituated cultural, social, religious, familial, and personal karmic conditionings dominate the untrained mind. Awareness practice brings these forces into view for observation.

When the mind notices an experience—an object—it takes note of its distinctive characteristics. For example, when looking at two pieces of fruit, the mind notices what makes this one an apple, that one an orange. Or the mind can look at two pieces of fruit of the same variety and identify which one it prefers; so, too, with people, emotions, and meditative experiences. We recognize this as the evaluating and judging mind. It often comes as a shock to discover how relentless and shameless the judging mind can be. We

can become quite distressed and embarrassed by all the judging that goes on outside our control—and then we judge that! However, it is a wrong understanding to think that we should somehow be able to stop it.

We have the entire history of human evolution to thank for our ability to discern the subtleties among the varieties of fruit as well as of people and experiences. We need that capacity in order to make wise choices in life. We do not want to stop that natural activity of mind; and, anyway, it would be impossible. What causes us distress is our aversion to what is happening. This aversion is conditioned by our attachment to our preferences. It is not the evaluating that is so distressing; it is our assumption that it should not be happening. The belief that “this should not be happening!” is itself a wrong attitude based on misunderstanding the natural activity of mind.

The untrained mind is driven to distraction, always rushing to avoid, to catch up to, or to act on our thoughts, feelings and judgments. To paraphrase Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, “The human mind is stuck in an absolute traffic jam of thoughts!” In practice, when we take on the role of traffic cop, policing and trying to disentangle the gridlock of thoughts, we are practicing from an attitude of hostility and aversion towards them. With this attitude, thoughts have become the enemy to be defeated, overcome, or banished. This is both frustrating and impossible.

Our practice is to be aware and observe all activities of mind as they happen. Sayadaw U Tejaniya acknowledges, “The mind is not yours but you are responsible for it.” and encourages, “Don’t feel disturbed by the thinking mind. You are not practicing to prevent thinking; but rather to recognize and acknowledge thinking whenever it arises.”

Stability of Mind (*samadhi*)

Stability of mind, or concentration (*samadhi*), develops in direct proportion to the continuity of awareness. It is essential for seeing into the nature of experience and for the unfolding of insight knowledge, the progressively refined intuitive understandings of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and conditionality. It's also important, along the path of practice, not to conflate experiences of concentration with insight knowledge.

We often begin our meditation practice by focusing attention on the breath at the nostrils, the rise and fall of the abdomen, a sound, a simple or sophisticated visualization, a thought/feeling like lovingkindness or *bodhicitta* [awakened heart]. We might mistakenly conclude that insight practice is about focusing exclusively on a single object for a sustained period of time, especially since this focused stability on an object is sufficient for temporarily purifying the mind of defilements (which clarifies the mind for finer levels of observation). However, the unfolding of insight knowledge emerges from the stability of mind while observing diverse objects.

As awareness gains momentum, we become able to sustain attention even when a wide range of diverse objects comes into view. At this point, the object attended to is not as important as sustaining the continuity of awareness. In fact, any object that calls the attention is the object to be aware of. Maturing insight practice notices the rapid arising and passing away of a full range of dissimilar, changing objects. And, while it can initially feel very destabilizing to try to maintain awareness of a kaleidoscope of changing objects; at this time, continually re-focusing on a chosen primary object is actually counterproductive to the emerging insight knowledge.

At this point in practice, the feeling of instability often challenges the assumption that meditation should make one feel calm and peaceful. We may then question why our meditative experience isn't what we had thought (or hoped) it would be. This questioning attitude is a common manifestation of doubt. Mahasi Sayadaw says, "This doubt is so subtle that it is rarely detected, but is instead mistaken for investigation. This doubt masquerades as analytical knowledge."

Thinking does not resolve doubt; engaging with the content of the doubting thoughts only reinforces them. Rather, simple awareness of the "figuring out" attitude of mind exposes and momentarily purifies the observing mind of the defilements of frustration, disappointment, attachment, and doubt. The increasing stability of mind—through continuity of attention to the arising (and ceasing) defilements—keeps us on the path of insight.

With this, a new challenge arises. While the continuous awareness on momentarily changing objects supports the unfolding of insight over time, it also brings about dramatic effects such as a tranquility, aloofness, or seclusion of mind. We can experience simmering well-being, bliss, pleasantly distorted perceptions of ordinary reality, exquisite clarity, effortless energy, overwhelming confidence, and gratitude. We feel peaceful and spacious; indeed, with a sense of relief, we might interpret these effects as *It*—the long-sought goal of our practice!

However, these effects of insight concentration, called "spiritual goodies," by Sayadaw U Pandita, are pseudo-*nirvana*, and when first met, almost always condition wrong attitudes of mind in practice. Indulging in these feelings is attachment. Believing, "This is it!" is delusion. Thinking, "Now I've got it!" is wrong view. Concluding, "I've

done it!” is the voice of pride. These are defilements. Here, it is helpful to remember the adage, “The stronger the awareness, the subtler the defilements,” and to practice, as Mahasi Sayadaw encourages, “by ignoring the dramatic displays, and paying more attention to the awareness.”

Increasing stability of mind enables us to see the emerging terrain of the mind, including the elevated peaks and the deep crevasses. Whether exquisitely pleasant or numbingly unpleasant, physical or mental, gross or subtle, familiar or novel, wisdom understands that each moment is “just another experience being known,” even the “spiritual goodies.” With an attitude of “It’s just joy. Just bliss. Just ecstasy,” Sayadaw U Pandita promises, “there are better things ahead.”

Wisdom (*pranna*)

With faith and energy, awareness grows and the various lenses of the mind through which life is seen become exposed. In turn, concentration temporarily tranquilizes the mind into less reactivity and we can see more deeply. It is then that the wisdom of understanding correctly (*pranna*) disentangles the mind from the story and releases it from suffering. As Sayadaw U Tejaniya has acknowledged, “Awareness alone is not enough.”

Observing our lives is like viewing a large tapestry on a distant wall. From far away, we see the images that create the narrative of the tapestry. We have many stories—about our selves, about others, about why and how things happen, about our past, about our future, about our likes and dislikes. Unconsciously, we usually weave every personal

experience into the tapestry of “me,” replete with *my* attitudes, *my* aspirations, *my* foibles, *my* fears, *my* strengths, *my* limitations, *my* irritations, *my* beliefs, and *my* delusions.

With some awareness, we can begin to see our stories, at first like the tapestry across the room. When, because of suffering, our attention is repeatedly called to look more closely at a particular piece of our experience, gradually the knotted threads of our unadulterated experiences woven into the story become apparent. Seeing the narrative of life close enough to recognize the individual threads out of which it is created offers the understanding that liberates. Personal suffering has no footing when understanding the view of moment-to-moment experiences arises. Then wise understanding dissolves the suffering.

In my early years of dharma practice, awareness discovered a previously unseen narrative of self-pity. Supplemental threads of this story were my perceived inability to do the practice, the blame I felt towards my alcoholic father, my judgments in my personal relationships, and my deepest fears that I was not up to the task I had set myself. For days I struggled not to become entangled in these thoughts. I did this by affirming my aspiration, arousing thoughts of self-love and acceptance, taking refuge, and just observing the feeling of self-pity, the sense of failure, blame, judgments and fears.

With increasing stability of mind, awareness began to recognize these previously unseen tendencies of unconscious self-pity and react less dramatically. The habit was such a frequent visitor, it had moved in and had almost become a permanent resident in my mind. At times, the line between indulging in the old habit and awareness blurred and shifted. When indulging had the upper hand, I felt oppressed and suffered from a bad

attitude. When awareness was present, confidence and equanimity arose accompanied by a good attitude. All attitudes of mind need to be acknowledged in practice.

Over time, I came to understand that these were just physical and mental experiences being known. They were ever-changing. Whether they appeared or not was the result of a conjunction of conditions beyond the immediate control of my wishes. I suffered when they were not seen. When seen, suffering ceased. The slightest turn of the mind toward appropriating or identifying with any facet of the process or narrative was seen and understood as impersonally conditioned phenomena. As the Buddha said, “Not me. Not mine. Not who I am.”

In the end, just observing and acknowledging, with an attitude of taking it all in stride, gives rise to wise understanding and disentanglement. This amazing journey of discovery through insight knowledge is the path of liberation. Right attitude in practice fearlessly inquires, “What story of suffering am I telling myself?” When awareness observes the threads of the story, wisdom dissolves the suffering; which is why Sayadaw U Tejaniya acknowledges, “Awareness alone is not enough.” and concludes, “It is not you who removes the defilements, wisdom does that job.”

It is up to each one of us to choose whether to take the journey. As Don Juan encouraged Carlos Castañeda, “We either make ourselves miserable, or we make ourselves strong. The amount of work is the same.”