

The Art of Investigation

How a closer look at our likes and dislikes can lead to equanimity
Sayadaw U Tejaniya Spring 2020

I once was sitting in meditation while listening to my teacher, Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw, giving a dhamma talk. My mind was very calm, but suddenly I saw it become highly agitated. How did this happen? How did anger arise in the mind so quickly when it was peaceful only moments before?

In that moment, I noticed something very interesting: my mind became curious about what had happened. It wanted to know about itself. It wanted to know why it had lost its peacefulness and had become angry. So it had backed up a bit, and it began to ask questions. Its interest in knowing itself then changed the mind's quality away from anger. It wanted to learn and know the truth, and, because of that, it began to gently watch the anger run its course.

As I continued to sit, I was able to watch aversion operating in the mind. On the one hand, the mind was straining to hear what my teacher was saying. On the other hand, a group of children were making noise just outside the meditation hall. I wanted them to stop, and I saw the mind complaining about the noise and complaining that I couldn't hear my teacher's talk. Some strong feelings came up. The observing mind saw everything that was going on in the mind.

Can you see how expansive the mind's field of view was at this point? After it saw itself going back and forth between these two sides for a while, it saw the dissatisfaction, the aversion. The mind realized that it had taken one kind of sound, which was the sound of my teacher's voice, and labeled it "good" and favorable, whereas the sounds of other people talking were "bad," unwanted sounds.

In this moment of realization, the mind didn't favor one object or another. It was able to hear sounds as just sounds, without buying into the story the mind was telling about good sounds and bad sounds. At that point the mind stopped both its craving to hear my teacher's voice and its aversion to the voices of the people who were talking. Instead, the mind just remained in the middle and continued watching with interest. The mind saw the suffering and just died down. This is how to meditate—with interest and inquiry every time one or more of the three unwholesome root qualities [craving, anger, and confusion] arise.

The Buddha called this vital quality of inquiry in the mind *dhamma vicaya*, which means a mind that naturally investigates reality. It is a mind that studies itself by asking questions to discover what is happening and why it is happening. The mind wants to know the nature of the three unwholesome root qualities.

Often practitioners pay attention to mindfulness and right effort, but they forget to practice *dhamma vicaya*. They forget to investigate and to ask questions about experience in order to learn. But mindfulness is about understanding. You have to use wise thinking to decide how to handle things; you cannot limit your practice to continuously being aware. That's not good enough.

The unwholesome roots are very dominant in the mind. They are very experienced, very skillful, and they will always get their way if we are not aware. If you don't fully recognize them and bring in wisdom, they will take over the mind.

The equanimity that came when I was listening to my teacher and the visitors talk was the result of true understanding of the nature of liking and disliking in the mind. This arose through observation and investigation of the discomfort that I was feeling.

In this same way, as soon as you recognize any mental discomfort, turn your attention toward it to learn all that you can about it. If you can see subtle mental discomfort, watch it change: Does it increase or decrease? As the mind becomes more equanimous and sensitive, it will recognize subtle reactions more easily.

Always take the arising of an unskillful root quality as an opportunity to investigate its nature. Ask yourself questions! How do the unwholesome roots make you feel? What thoughts arise in the mind? How does what you think affect the way you feel? How does what you feel affect the way you think? What is the attitude behind the thoughts? How does any of this change the way you perceive pain?

The mind needs to be directed, and dhamma vicaya does that. Once you have set a direction for the mind, it will continue in that direction. This is a natural quality of the mind. If you leave the mind undirected, there will be chaos.

Take fear as another example. If there is fear and you decide to investigate this emotion, you are setting the mind in the right direction. If, however, you try to get rid of this fear, you are directing the mind wrongly.

Give yourself time. Go slowly, feel your way through whatever is happening. Try to gather as much information as you can. That's the function of awareness—to gather information. Whenever you feel there is an issue that needs to be looked into, investigate it. What is going on in the mind will seem rather chaotic at first.

You need to look at the same issues repeatedly and from different angles. As your awareness becomes more continuous, your fear will settle down, and you will be able to understand which issues are important and which are not.

You will see the benefit of the practice more clearly and understand what you have learned at deeper levels. All this will further increase your confidence.

Never get discouraged when you lose awareness. Every time you recognize that you have lost awareness, be happy. The fact that you have recognized that you lost awareness means that you are now aware. Just keep looking at this process of losing and regaining awareness and learn from it.

Life is a reflection of the quality of the mind. If you really understand the mind, you understand the world. You gain this understanding by observing and learning. You don't need to believe anything you don't intellectually understand. Just keep investigating. Just keep learning from your personal experience.



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