

Interest and Investigation

By Rebecca Dixon

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Getting Interested

Interest is what engages us with any activity. It's energizing in a heart-opening way. Interest is the third of the Seven Factors of Awakening, called "Vicaya" in Pali. It plays an important role in our meditation and daily life practice.

Part of the difficulty many of us have staying aware of the breath is a lack of interest. There are several techniques for arousing interest in the breath:

- notice characteristics of each breath: whether it's long, deep, fast, etc.
- notice the pause between breaths: when it occurs, how long it lasts
- remember how vital breathing is: envision breathing in life, making it yours, and sending it back into the world
- look for the pleasure in breathing: miss a few breaths and see how good it feels to breathe again

There's one commonly used device that's quite *unskillful*: using the ego, as when we scold ourselves when attention strays

Insight Meditation involves being aware of more than just the breathing. Once we've established enough concentration on the breath to be able to return to it frequently and easily, we can use another aspect of Vicaya, which is Investigation. When we turn interest toward the unfolding of the dharma, it's called "Divine Investigation."

Learning the Dharma with Interest

Buddha said all the dharma can be found in this fathom-long body. We do this during meditation by grounding our awareness in the experience of the body, and from there observing the activities of the mind and heart. Some students avoid this investigation because they mistake it for "thinking." It's just a simple mental process of recognizing what is happening without going into an extended train of hypothetical thought about it.

A key use of Investigation is in the Four Wise Efforts, to encourage states of mind that lead to calm and freedom, or discourage those that lead to distress or dukkha, often translated as suffering. When our meditation practice has taught us to let go of thoughts and return attention to breathing, we can put that skill to wise use by letting go of thought patterns that we've learned will lead to suffering.

How do we learn what causes suffering? We **feel** it. In the **body**. It's important to notice the way the body feels when we're distressed, because the body doesn't lie. The mind can tell us our thought habits are good when they actually cause distress.

We can practice seeing the effects of thoughts and emotions in the body, both in sitting practice and in life. When thoughts seize our attention during meditation, we can use the moment when we realize we've been thinking to investigate the way those thoughts have left the body feeling. Compare how the body felt while we were lost in thought to the way it feels when we're watching the breath. The difference is almost always some degree of distress. Noticing this shows us what causes suffering and how to let go of it.

In daily life, we know when we're upset. A good way to calm down is to investigate how the body feels. This interrupts the emotional train of thought which prolongs our distress and clouds our judgment. If we practice watching the emotions' effect on the body during meditation, it will be easier to do during the day. Once the body's reaction subsides enough for the mind to calm, we can decide on the wisest course of action.