

## *Filling in the Buddha's Outline*

*January 4, 2019*

We're working on a set of skills here that are meant to solve a problem. The problem is: *Why is it that everything we do is for the sake of happiness but we often end up causing pain and suffering?*

The Buddha gives two big frameworks for approaching this problem. In fact, they're his only teachings that he says are categorical—in other words, true across the board, all the time, in all situations. One is that unskillful behavior should be abandoned and skillful behavior should be developed. The other is the four noble truths, going into the unskillful behavior in the mind that's causing suffering and then seeing what kind of skillful behavior we can develop in its place so that we can bring suffering to an end. That's basically the big framework for the problem.

Now, the framework tells you a lot. The Buddha is saying that suffering comes from our actions, and particularly from unskillful actions of the mind. The unskillful craving and clinging can be brought to an end by developing actions that crave and cling in a different, more skillful way: Crave to have right view, right resolve, all the way down through right mindfulness and right concentration. That's a kind of craving, too, but, it's a good one. There has to be the desire to develop the path. Otherwise the path doesn't happen.

And the rest of the Buddha's teachings basically give more detail on those issues. Then, as he said, in some cases the detail is true across the board; in other cases, it really depends on the situation.

Across the board, the Buddha says no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no harsh speech, no divisive speech, no idle chatter; trying to avoid greed that goes out of bounds—of course, that raises the question, "What are the bounds?" The bounds start with any greed that would require that you do things that are against the precepts in order to get what you want. The Buddha also says, across the board, no ill will—in other words wanting to see other people suffer—and to avoid wrong view: the wrong view that your actions don't make any difference, that generosity isn't worthwhile, that gratitude isn't worthwhile, that nobody knows what happens after death so who cares.

Those are things you have to avoid across the board.

As you get into the four noble truths, especially when you get into the noble eightfold path, there are specific instructions on how to get the mind into concentration by being mindful, but by and large those truths provide a pretty large outline with lots of spaces. In those spaces, the Buddha indicates where some

problems might be or where things might evolve into problems—sometimes the mind is too sluggish, sometimes too restless—but to see precisely what the problems are, you have to read the situation for yourself.

The ajaans often talk about taking a survey of your mind when you sit down and before you focus on the breath. In what direction is the mind headed? Is it sleepy? Is it drowsy? Well, there are ways of counteracting that. If you find that a particular topic puts you to sleep, change the topic. If you're focused on the breath, try changing the way that you breathe—or changing to another topic, something that engages the mind more, such as the contemplation of the body or goodwill. Get up, walk around, do something to stir your juices a little bit, to wake yourself up. If you already have some concentration, think of the awareness filling the body down to every little cell. Explore the parts of the body that you don't usually pay attention to—say, the areas between the toes, between the fingers: In other words, do something to make the breath interesting and have at full body awareness. That can be energizing.

However, these are things that you have to play around with because each person's situation is going to be different. This is why the Buddha gives such large outlines where there are spaces for you to fill in, because your situation today may differ from your situation tomorrow, and your situation right here, right now, may differ from the situation of the person sitting right next to you. So, look and see what you need right now.

If the mind is restless, it needs to be steadied. First remind yourself that the worries you're restless about are not going to accomplish anything. All too often, we're restless because we're worried about something in the future or about some situation in the present moment. Remind yourself that your worrying is not going to solve the problem. The problem gets solved by developing qualities of alertness, mindfulness, ardency, concentration, discernment: the things that we're supposed to work on as we meditate. So, if you want to solve the problem, often it's good to work on these skills right here. The skills themselves as you meditate may not solve the problem on their own but they give you the skill set you're going to need when you actually have to start thinking about the problem. You can breathe in a way that calms you down.

So you have to read the situation to see what needs to be done. This involves getting a sense of the right time and the right place for things, which is a concept that the Buddha emphasizes many times.

Say, with the factors for awakening: Some factors of awakening are energizing. Rapture, effort, taking an analytical attitude toward what's going on in the mind

—those can wake you up. Taking an analytical attitude toward what’s going on in the body: That’ll wake you up, too.

Other things are more calming. Focusing on the parts of the body that seem more calm and getting the mind more concentrated, developing an attitude of equanimity.

So you’ve got to read the situation. What’s needed right now? The Buddha makes a comparison with trying to get a fire going. Sometimes the fire is too strong, so you’ve got to put ashes on it. Sometimes it’s too weak, so you’ve got to put more fuel in.

He makes a similar observation with the bases for success: Sometimes your desire’s too much, sometimes it’s not enough. In other words, it’s not focused on the right thing. You’re supposed to be focused on the causes, and as for your desires for the results at the end, you can put them aside. You know that they’re there but you don’t focus on them, you focus on what you’ve got to do. And the same with the other bases of success.

Persistence: Your efforts may be too much, too little. The focus of your intent may be too narrow or too broad, and your analysis may be too much or too little. So you’ve got to figure out what’s right for here right now, and the results will be the means by which you judge what’s right for here right now. In other words, what happens as a result will tell you whether your efforts are right or wrong for the situation.

This is why evaluation plays such an important role in the meditation. You do something and you look at the results. Are they good enough? If you’re not sure, just keep doing what you’re doing until the results becomes clear. If they’re not right, then you can change. It’s in this way that your discernment gets developed.

Sometimes you hear that tranquility meditation is one thing and insight meditation is something else, but the Buddha never taught it that way. He said to do concentration, and that it’s going to require a certain amount of tranquility and a certain amount of insight to get into jhana. And where does the insight come in? It comes in seeing the connections between what you’re doing and the results you’re getting, and judging them as to whether they’re good enough. And your sense of what’s “good enough” should develop over time.

You see if there’s any disturbance in the mind, it’s a potential problem. You ask yourself: To what extent am I contributing to that? That’s actually applying the four noble truths to a very immediate problem. The four noble truths are not objects that you put up on a table and worship. They’re tools for analyzing problems, and the problem here is this: that there’s something weighing down the mind. The four noble truths teach you to ask yourself: “What are you doing?”

They keep focusing you back on your actions—and that’s the kind of knowledge that, while we’re doing the meditation, counts as real knowledge. Other kinds of knowledge can be very detailed but if they don’t fall into that framework—what are you doing, what could you be doing that can put an end to suffering?—if they don’t fall into that framework, they count as ignorance as far as the Buddha’s concerned, particularly with regard to this problem that we’re trying to solve.

So a lot of the practice is the same as with any skill. If you’re a carpenter and you’re planing a piece of wood, how much pressure do you put on it? How much is too much? How much is too little? Well, you learn from doing.

When you’re cooking, how much salt is too much? How much is too little? Well, you learn from doing, keeping in mind that basic principle that if there’s a problem, you want to look back on your own actions. Now, this doesn’t mean that other people are not creating problems for you, but the big problem that you can solve is: Why do your actions create suffering? That’s the problem that is really worth pursuing.

The same principle applies in daily life. You have to look at your actions. Here again you go back to the precepts, you go back to the Buddha’s basic teachings on what he calls the ten guidelines: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no harsh speech, no divisive speech, no idle chatter, no inordinate greed, no ill will, and avoiding wrong views. That’s the basic outline, and there are lots of things not covered by that outline. The outline is kind of a sketch with big blank areas, and those are the areas where you have to use your own judgment. Again, the judgment is based on, “What am I doing that’s leading to unnecessary problems for the mind and how can I stop?” As you go out into daily life, do you spend all your time meditating? No. To what extent do you deal with other people? How much of that is too much? That’s something you have to find out for yourself. But notice, the way to judge it is: What impact is it having on your mind?

Ajaan Fuang was once talking about how some people go out into the world and they try to do so much to help the world that they reach a point where their goodness breaks, as he put it, and they totally give up. They have no energy anymore. That’s a sign that they haven’t been watching themselves all along. You have to know how to watch yourself and notice, “In this case, I’m getting too involved. I’ve got to pull back. In this case, more needs to be done right now.” There are no hard and fast rules, but there is that basic principle: Look at what you’re doing and what you can change in what you’re doing. In some cases, there are things happening in the world that you cannot change, tasks that you have to take on regardless of what you may think you would like to take on. There is work that has to be done and you do it. You have to train yourself to be up to doing it.

Ajaan Fuang, every now and then, would spring work projects on us. At the end of the meal he would come in and say, “Okay, and today we’re going to do  $x$ ,” and sometimes  $x$  would require the entire day. One time it went from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 a.m., working on a cement pouring. At times like that, you’d have to tell yourself: “Okay, I’ve got to forget totally about my plans for a meditation schedule today. I’ve just got to do what needs to be done.” And so you do it—but while you’re doing it, you try to develop what inner strength you can.

Think of your meditation. Think of your breath and what you’ve learned about making the breath energized inside, and give the mind a place where it can stay. After all, even when you’re doing work, how much of your attention really is on the work? Well, take the part that’s not on your work and devote it to the breath. Some jobs require 100% of your attention so you give them 100% of your attention. Others, though, require maybe 30% or 20%, so give the remaining 70% or 80% to the breath so that your mind can have a place where it can nourish itself and gain some sustenance.

Remember, though, that not all of the skills of the practice are related to meditation. Some of them have to do with the other perfections you can develop: qualities like endurance, patience, determination, good will. To develop these qualities is also part of the practice.

Remind yourself of that teaching about the acrobats. The Buddha tells the story of two acrobats, one standing on the top of a bamboo pole and the other standing on top of his shoulders. The one below tells the one above, “Okay, you look out after me and I’ll look out after you, and that way we’ll get down from the pole safely.” And the other one says, “No, that’s not going to work. I’ll look out after myself; you look out after yourself, and that way we’ll get down from the pole safely.” And the Buddha said in that particular case the person on top was right. If you maintain your balance, it helps other people maintain their balance.

But he said there are also cases where looking out after another person helps with your practice. When you’re kind, when you show patience, when you develop equanimity and goodwill in your dealings with other people, that strengthens your mind, strengthens the goodness of your mind. This is an important principle. We have to remember that this skill we’re practicing here is not just a technique. It involves a lot of the qualities that we can say are qualities of a good heart.

And we live in a culture where a good heart is not really prized. You hear of people called captains of industry, captains of government. Well, they didn’t rise to those positions out of a good heart.

So in this way the practice has to be counter-cultural. You have to stand outside of the culture a bit. But then there *is* a part of every human culture that does value a good heart, so that you're still in tune with that part of the culture. What Buddhism does is it to emphasize the good heart as much as possible—because basically that's what the desire to put an end to suffering comes down to. You want to find happiness in a way that doesn't harm anybody. That's a good-hearted desire. You want to find a happiness that's really worthwhile. In other words, that will last. That's a good-hearted desire, too.

What the Buddha is offering is a large framework for approaching the question of how to maintain that good heart and get good results. Once you've got the larger framework—in other words, seeing that even though other people may be contributing to the problem, the problem that's causing you suffering can be traced back to your actions—once you've got that framework in mind, you keep looking back to your actions. If you don't like the results you're getting right now, go back and change what you're doing. Look again. Make changes again. And it's in that way that you learn.

You gain a sense of when the right time for engaging with other people, when is the right time for meditating, and—when you're meditating—what is the right time to work on developing more energy in the practice, what time is the right time to be more analytical in the practice, what time is the time to be more still. With practice, you gain a sense of these things.

The Buddha has offered you the framework for knowing what to look for, along with offering you a range of skills to apply, to help you figure out is the problem right now, and what you do right now. So he's not leaving you to keep re-inventing the Dhamma wheel all the time, but he does expect you to use your powers of discernment, your powers of observation. Otherwise if everything were all laid out—insert tab A into slot B, where everything is all pre-cut and just all you have to do is assemble it—it would be a foolproof practice, but you'd still be a fool. There's no foolproof way to awakening. We may be foolish already as we start, but part of the practice is to teach us how to be more sensitive, more wise, more alert to what's the right time, what's the right place. That's how discernment develops and it's through discernment that we overcome our foolishness and the problem gets solved.