

What You Can Do

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There's a discourse where a group of monks are going off to a foreign land. They come to say goodbye to the Buddha, and he says, "Have you said goodbye to Sariputta yet?" They say, "No, we haven't." He says, "Well, go say goodbye to Sariputta before you go." So they go to see Ven. Sariputta. He says, "People in this place where you're going: If they ask you, 'What does your teacher teach?' how are you going to answer them?" And they respond, "We'd like to hear how you'd answer it."

Sariputta's answer starts in an interesting way. He doesn't start with a general principle. He doesn't say life is suffering or any of those other things you usually hear are attributed to the Buddha. He starts with an activity. He says, "The Buddha teaches the subduing of passion." The next question, of course, is: the subduing of passion for what? For the five aggregates. The next question: Why does he teach that? What advantage does he see in this? Because if you have passion for these things, you're going to suffer. If you're able to abandon passion for them, you don't suffer anymore.

Then Sariputta goes on to state a general principle: that if abandoning unskillful qualities caused suffering, the Buddha wouldn't teach it. But it's because abandoning unskillful qualities leads to freedom from suffering, that's why the Buddha teaches it. It's the same with developing skillful qualities. If this led to suffering, he wouldn't teach it. The fact that it does lead to the end of suffering: That's why he teaches it.

The Buddha himself said at another point that if it were not possible to do this, he wouldn't teach it. But it is possible. We can abandon unskillful qualities, blameworthy qualities, and we can develop skillful ones, blameless ones in their place. In other words, the teachings are all about things you *can do*. The Buddha doesn't say: Be awakened. Or be free. He says, you do this and it will take you to awakening, it will take you to freedom. And he lays out the steps. The steps that are not necessarily easy, but they can be done.

It's important to notice that he focuses you on things that can be done. He doesn't deal in vague abstractions. He doesn't talk in general terms about awakening or emptiness or freedom. He says, "This is what you do. You can do this and it will make you see things more clearly. You can do this, and it will make you more free."

So it's always important to focus on what we can do. That starts with looking at what we're doing right now to see where it's unskillful and, as the Buddha says, where it's blameworthy. That's an interesting concept. We don't use the word "blameworthy" much anymore. But throughout the texts, certain types of happiness are said to be blameworthy, whereas others are blameless. "Blameworthy" is meant in the sense of causing suffering or harm to other people, or suffering or harm to ourselves. When we're making our happiness on the backs of other people, on top of their suffering, causing them harm—that's blameworthy. Blameless happiness doesn't have to cause anyone any harm. So we have to take that dimension into consideration as well.

So this is where you look. You look at your actions. Notice that when Sariputta is talking about the teaching, he starts out with something you can do, or a direction as to what you can do. He doesn't deal in abstract principles. You look at your thoughts; you look at your words; you look at your deeds. These are things you can see, and things you can have some power over. You can will yourself to be less harmful. When an idea comes up in the mind, you can decide: "Am I going to continue thinking this idea? Or is it something better to steer clear of?" These are choices you're making all the time. And the Buddha says you can make them skillfully.

I was reading recently of a new field in economics called behavioral economics, which unlike classical economics starts with the presupposition that people don't always act in their own best interest. And you want to say, duh. Look all around you. People are always doing stupid things, shooting themselves in the foot. This is what the Buddha is basically saying. He doesn't say life is suffering. He says people are stupid. They cause themselves to suffer—i.e., they want happiness but they don't do what's going to lead to their happiness. They

do things that are actually going to make them suffer. They do these things again and again and again, and they wonder why they're suffering.

But, as the Buddha says, it's not mysterious. It's something you can actually look at. It's not some hidden power. There's no big force behind the scenes like the man in *The Wizard of Oz* hiding behind the curtain pulling all the levers. There is no evil force; there is no good force acting through you. You're making the choices, and all the processes that go into making those choices are right here available for you to see. But you choose not to see. You've learned to push certain things out of your consciousness, which doesn't mean that they go away and disappear. They just go into the subconscious. The subconscious is not a particular area of the brain. It's simply the choices being made without your paying full attention to them. It's not a separate force. It's just choices being made under the radar. But you can adjust your radar so you can pick up these things.

That's why we meditate. That's why we develop our mindfulness, our alertness, so we can bring more of these things into conscious awareness, so that when we say something, we know why we said it. When we do something, we know why we did it. At the same time, the Buddha gives us the confidence that we can change our ways, and that we don't have to get tied up in knots over our mistakes.

This is why the path is a stepwise path. There were people in later centuries of the Buddhist tradition that heaped ridicule and abuse on the idea of a gradual path, saying that you can't get to something unconditioned by doing conditioned things; you can't get to the unfabricated by doing fabrications. But that's directly contrary to what the Buddha said. He said it is possible. We now know through studies of complex causality that it really is possible for complex systems to contain the seeds for their own undoing. You can use fabricated activity to get to the unfabricated. And the Buddha is simply saying, "Pay careful attention to how you do things. What choices are you making?"

Start on very simple levels. If you feel daunted by some of the practices, back up a little bit. Ask yourself, "Where can I get a handle on this?" The practice starts with generosity, virtue, and meditation. One of the most basic ways of meditating is to develop thoughts of goodwill, wishing for happiness. If you find that difficult, ask yourself why. Do you not want to be happy? Do you resent other people's happiness? What do you gain from their unhappiness? Think these things through.

When you spread thoughts of goodwill, you're not radiating pink rays around the world. You actually go through the list of people you either know personally or you know of: Is there anybody out there that you really would like to see suffer? And you could probably come up with a list. Then you ask yourself: What do you gain from their suffering? What kind of pleasure, what kind of wellbeing would you gain from their suffering? And would they sit around just moaning and groaning with no impact on anyone else, or would they go out to retaliate, doing some really unskillful things to inflict more suffering on other people? It's usually the case that when people have been suffering, they'd like to spread it around a little bit.

So the Buddha has you think in very basic ways, and not pretend that you feel goodwill for anyone you don't. But he teaches you how to think in such a way that you really can honestly change your mind and change your heart. This is important. The whole practice is about changing your heart and mind, bit by bit by bit, by changing the way you act, the way you speak, the way you think, the different thoughts you choose to think and not to think. And you find that by focusing on your actions, you really do become a different person.

There is that passage, "What am I becoming as days and nights fly past, fly past?" What kind of person are you becoming through the way you choose to act? That, basically, is the question. To change who you are, you don't go around readjusting the parts of your ego. You go around focusing on your actions.

As when we're sitting here right now with our eyes closed: You can be focusing on the breath, on *buddho*, on goodwill—whatever theme seems most congenial to the mind, most helpful in getting the mind to settle down, gain a sense of peace, wellbeing, and clarity. You can focus on the unattractiveness of the body. If the body is a big issue right now, you need a lot of thought to untangle it because so many complex attachments

are right there.

But again, those attachments: They're not an abstract quality. They're habitual ways of acting. This is important. Keep looking at these things in terms of actions. And each action that you do in a skillful way is a move in the right direction. Just wanting to act skillfully is a move in the right direction. If you want it often enough, then you finally decide, "Well, I'd better get around and actually do something about it." And so you chip, chip, chip away at your actions. And then, without you really having to focus on who you are, you find that the kind of person you are changes.

So when you hear people say that the point of meditation is not to do, but to be, they're focusing on results. But the results have to come from focusing on what you do. Each time you breathe in, you remind yourself: Stay with the breath. That's a decision, a choice. After a while, it becomes easier. You don't have to keep reminding yourself so forcefully. There's just a slight little note, an image, in the back of your mind. But it's there to keep reminding you because you could change your mind at any point. You could focus someplace else. You could do something else. But you decide for right now that you want to stay right here, right here, right here.

Learning how to see the meditation as a kind of action is going to be very important all the way along, from the very beginning to the very end—especially as you approach the end. There is a tendency, when you get into deep stages of meditation, to think you've hit some ground of being, your true identity, or the true nature of things, whether it's a sense of oneness, a sense of bright awareness, or a sense of interconnectedness where your ordinary sense of self gets harder and harder to detect. At that point, it's very easy to think that you've hit some sort of metaphysical principle, some abstract quality or principle of being.

But the Buddha says, No, look at it in terms of what you did to get there, what you're doing to stay there. Continue looking at it as an action that's going to have a result, that's actually giving you results in the present. Are the results steady? Is there any inconstancy there at all? If you can detect it, you say, "Oh, there's still some work to be done." There's still some stress going up, going down—it may be very subtle, but it's still there. There's more to do.

So this is a path of action all the way along, which makes it a good path, because if it were a path of abstract principles, you can't *do* an abstraction. You can't will an abstraction; it's something you can't do at all. But you can do actions. You can choose to do something that's more skillful, less blameworthy. And nine times out of ten, the more skillful choice is the obvious one. Maybe not the easiest one, but it's obvious what's skillful. There are a few cases where it's not so obvious, but focus on the ones where it is obvious, and you clear up a lot of problems. As for when the issue is not so obvious, ask yourself why. Is the problem really that complicated, or are you creating unnecessary complications for yourself?

Remember this: The Buddha always has you focus on what you can do. You may be reading ahead in the book and thinking, "Wow, it gets pretty difficult." But again, he has you take it step by step. If you haven't mastered division, if you haven't mastered multiplication, don't think about calculus. Go back and work on your multiplication tables. There's nothing demeaning about that. Snide Mahayanists may say you're not awakened, working on the basics. But the wise thing is to admit, "Okay, I am not awakened yet." Figure out where you need to do more work, what you're capable of doing, and you do it. That's how your capacity grows: because you focus on what you can do.

So always keep this principle in mind. As Sariputta started his discussion of what the Buddha taught, it was with an action; he recommends doing something. Now, abandoning passion: That's pretty far down the line. But you can learn how to abandon your passion for unskillful choices. You can begin on a level you find possible. As you work on what's possible, on what you can do, you find that your competence grows. Your confidence grows. Whether it takes a long time or a short time doesn't matter. But you do find at some point you're doing calculus. And it makes sense. It's nothing out of the ordinary, even though it may have seemed impossible before. But it's by focusing on what's possible that you expand the range of what's possible. That's how the practice works.