

Acceptance

October 31, 2008

As with so many other issues, the Buddha took a middle road when it came to the issue of other-power and self-power on the path. On the one hand, there's the famous passage where Ven. Ananda comes to see the Buddha and exclaims that having admirable friends is half of the practice, half of the holy life, and the Buddha says, "Don't say that, Ananda. Having admirable friends is the whole of the holy life." And the Buddha gives himself as an example, saying, "Without me as your admirable friend, you wouldn't be practicing the noble eightfold path."

Notice that he doesn't say, "I'm doing it for you." He says, "I'm an outside condition." He makes it possible for you to practice. If we didn't have the Buddha, if we didn't have the Dhamma to point the way to us, where would we be right now? We wouldn't be here meditating, that's for sure. We'd be off someplace else doing who knows what.

At the same time, though, there's also the passage where the Buddha says, "It's up to you to follow the path; the Tathagatas only point the way." Or the passage where a man comes to see the Buddha and says, "Why is it that when you teach the path to people, they don't all arrive at the goal?"—implying that there's something wrong with the Buddha as a teacher.

So the Buddha responds: "Have you ever given directions to people to follow the road to Rajagaha?"

The man says, "Yes."

"Do they all get to Rajagaha?"

"Well, some people follow the directions and they get there, but others don't and they end up 'way out west. That's something I can't take responsibility for."

The Buddha then says that, in the same way, he can't take responsibility for the fact that some people follow his instructions and achieve the noble attainments, while other people don't follow them. In other words, it's up to each of us to actually put the teachings into practice so that we can get the results.

The Dhamma we're trying to attain is something that's going to be found inside the heart. The Dhamma we're listening to right now is pointing to that Dhamma. That's why the word for Dhamma talk—*dhamma-desana*—literally means pointing to the Dhamma. These words are not the Dhamma. The words point to a possible attainment inside your heart, to the potentials that are inside your heart. It's up to you to develop them.

The problem of course is that there are many "yous" in there—lots of different potentials, lots of different opinions and intentions, lots of different goals. And the mind moves from one to another. When you sit down to meditate, part of the mind is with the program and part of the mind is not, which can be the cause for a lot of frustration. But you can learn how to use these many selves to your advantage. Remember, each of your selves is the result of an activity aimed at happiness. We "self" as a verb. We're engaged in selfing. If we had one set self, we'd be stuck there. That would be our nature and we wouldn't be able to change it. Any changes would have to come from outside. But fortunately we're not stuck with one self. We have lots of different selves, formed around

lots of different activities aimed at happiness. If we use these selves properly, they can help one another along. They can provide a perspective on one another so that what one self doesn't see, another self can see; what one self can't do, another self can.

So it's important that we learn to get all of these different selves working together. This is why the Buddha focuses so much attention on the issue of happiness, because all of our activities, all our selves, are aimed at happiness in one form or another. They have different understandings of what it might be, different strategies for how to get there, but they're all aimed at the same place. A large part of the practice is learning how to get them to work together to understand where true happiness can be found.

You're going to encounter this a lot as you meditate. You're sitting here with the breath, and suddenly there's an impulse to go someplace else. You have to examine the impulse, learn how to say No, and learn how to make the No stick. Sometimes you can do that simply by noticing, "Oh. Here comes an impulse heading in the wrong direction," and the impulse drops away. You're back with the breath. No problem. Other times the impulse to go off goes deeper than that. It's based on a really deep misunderstanding about where happiness can be found. In cases like that, you have to reason with the mind. You've got an old habit that may have worked in some circumstances in the past, but it's not appropriate right now.

This is why concentration requires some discernment. As the Buddha once said, "There's no jhana without discernment." To get the mind to settle down, you have to reason with the obstreperous parts that want to go off someplace else, to think about other things, plan other things. You have to reason with that particular set of selves to show them that their notions don't really lead to any true happiness, and you're all better off coming back.

As you fight off these different distractions, you find yourself going deeper and deeper into a lot of the mind's misunderstandings. This is how concentration gives rise to insight. Or as the Buddha said, "There's no discernment without jhana." The two qualities go together; they depend on each other. So we get good instructions, hear the Dhamma, see the Dhamma practiced in a way that's an inspiring example. That's the kind of help we get from outside. As for inside, we have to develop the conviction that we can do it and that it's really worth doing.

This is where the Buddha's teachings on acceptance come in. Often we hear that a central part of practice is radical acceptance: learning how to accept who you are, just as you are, and it's all okay. But that's making a lot of assumptions right there: that there is a "who-you-are," that you are a certain way, that you're going to stay that certain way, and it's all right to stay that certain way—all of which totally goes against what the Buddha had to teach. To begin with, he didn't say that you are a certain way, or that you're stuck there. The question of who you are is something he put aside. He has you focus instead on what you do. And what *are* you doing? Is it skillful or is it not? If it's not skillful, then, one, you've got to admit the fact that it's not skillful and, two, accept the fact you could make your behavior more skillful.

This is the part of acceptance that many of us resist. We may not be happy where we are, but for some reason we resist changing. "This is the way I am, and this is the way I'm going to stay." That kind of stubborn acceptance the Buddha doesn't encourage at all. Or, "This is the way I do things, and I'm going to keep

on doing them this way.” That’s a form of clinging—clinging to habits and practices—and it’s a cause of suffering. What the Buddha wants us to accept is the fact that our actions are causing suffering but we don’t have to keep acting in those ways. We have the potential to change. Many of us resist that. Even though we know we’re suffering, for some reason we don’t want to change. We disempower ourselves.

The first step in regaining some of that power is to have the conviction that, yes, the Buddha did gain awakening through his own efforts and, yes, he did it through developing qualities of mind that we have in a potential form and that we can develop too. That conviction is meant to be a challenge: Are you going to live your life without examining these possibilities, without trying to develop these qualities? If so, you’re missing out on a really important opportunity. That’s what true acceptance is: You accept the challenge—for you see that the alternative is continued suffering.

You can also see the Buddha’s position on acceptance in the five things he has us reflect on, day in and day out. The first four are: “I am subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation from all that is dear and appealing to me.” That’s accepting the fact of suffering in its various forms. And it’s not just you, not just me. Everybody is subject to these things.

But then the fifth thing he has us accept is that we’re the owners of our actions, heir to our actions, born of our actions, related through our actions, and have our actions as our arbitrators. Whatever we do, for good or for evil, to that will we fall heir. In other words, what we’re experiencing in the present is the result of our actions, past and present, and what we’ll experience in the future is also a result of our actions. So what we’re experiencing and are going to experience is up to us. We have to accept responsibility: There is suffering, we are responsible for the suffering that has happened, but we also have the potential not to suffer.

That’s another part of conviction, another part of the type of acceptance the Buddha has us develop: not just accepting where we are, but accepting that we bear responsibility for where we are. When we have the responsibility, we have the power to change. Again, some of us resist that. But where does that resistance lead us? It keeps us stuck in suffering. So to get out of that suffering, you develop conviction that awakening is possible and it can be found through developing qualities you already have.

That leads to the next strength, the next empowerment, which is persistence, energy, the effort we put into the practice. We realize that we can do this, and we don’t have much time, so we’d better get right to it. And stick with it. We practice when we feel like practicing, and we also practice when we don’t. We can’t let our moods be in charge. If we don’t follow the path now, who knows when we’re going to be able to follow it? It doesn’t get easier with age, you know. And nobody else can do it for us. Other people can point out the way, other people can inspire us with their example, but if we’re going to see the results, we have to do the actions. We have to train the mind, train our intentions. This takes time, so we have to stick with it.

This leads to the third strength, or the third empowerment, which is mindfulness: the ability to keep these facts in mind. You keep reminding yourself: Regardless of what you want to do, this is the way things are. If you don’t work at the practice now, you may not have the time in the future, so

you've got to remember to keep working at it now, keep at it now, keep at it now. Fortunately, it's not all work, not all strenuous effort. If you're mindful and alert as you try to develop skillful qualities and let go of unskillful ones, the mind comes to concentration. And concentration is characterized by pleasure, rapture, equanimity, a strong sense of wellbeing.

This is what gives us energy on the path. When the Buddha gives analogies for the different factors of the path, he often compares concentration to food. "We feed on rapture," he says, "like the radiant gods." Or when he compares our practice to a frontier fortress, he compares right concentration to the different stores of foods that keep the soldiers strong and well nourished. The pleasure of the concentration becomes a form of strength you can develop inside.

Based on that strength, you can strengthen your discernment, for the stillness and satisfaction of concentration enable you to perform the duties of discernment, starting with the ability to see clearly where suffering is arising and what's arising with it. You notice: What are you doing when there's suffering in the mind? When the suffering goes, what did you just do? What did you stop doing? What did you just change? You can see suffering arising and passing away, but more importantly, you can see its causes arising and passing away. That way you understand. This understanding is what allows you to cut through the causes with more and more precision, to get more skillful at all the duties of the four noble truths. When you're really skilled at these things, dropping the obsessions that cause suffering, the mind grows lighter and lighter. It's unburdened. You don't have to waste your energy, carrying the weight of suffering around.

These are all strengths we can develop within, a kind of inner power we can develop, once we know the path and are convinced that it can be done—and that we can do it. So it's important to accept that we have these potentials, that whatever way we behave, if it's unskillful, it can be changed. As the Buddha once said, if it weren't possible to abandon unskillful actions and to develop skillful ones, he wouldn't teach us to do these things. But it is possible.

This is why he has you focus on the issue of action, what you can *do* as opposed to what you *are*, or what you can do now, as opposed to what you've habitually been doing in the past. Habits can be changed. If you find yourself resisting that fact, you have to ask yourself why. Is it from laziness? From pride? And why do we engage in laziness, why do we engage in pride? What do we get out of it, what do we gain? These things may make us feel good in the present moment, but do they really make us happy? Do they really lead to wellbeing? You have to see that every action you take, every choice you make, is made for the purpose of happiness. But often it's misdirected, ill-advised. And so, given that every "you" is aimed at happiness, the wiser yous can reason strategically with the unskillful yous until you win them over. That's the kind of internal work we all have to do. This is how we take advantage of all our many selves. Accept that we have these good potentials. And accept the fact that if we don't develop them, we're going to keep on suffering.

So when we talk about acceptance in the Buddha's teachings, it's not simply accepting what you are. The Buddha has you accept *where* you are—i.e., you're stuck in suffering—but you don't have to stay there. Accept that you have the potential to go beyond suffering through training your actions, training your intentions, training the mind. We have the Buddha and his Sangha of noble

disciples as our examples. We have the Dhamma as our guide. That's the outside help, the outside power. The inside power is the determination we can generate from within as we follow their example, as we bring our actions in line with the guidance provided by the Dhamma, practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. This is the teaching that's stressed over and over again in the forest tradition: You don't change the Dhamma to suit yourself; you change yourself to fit with the Dhamma, i.e., you change your actions to fall in line with the Dhamma. That's how you develop your inner powers that can lead to true happiness, the happiness we all want.

Parts of us may resist, but we learn how to reason with those parts, reason with those attitudes. As we do, we'll find that everything converges. All the factors of the path come together. And at that point it doesn't really matter whether it was because of outside help or inside help, i.e., our inner strength. The fact is that we've reached release and that's all that matters.

So accept that that's a possibility and see where it takes you.

Perfections as Priorities

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We sit here focused on the breath, mindful of the breath, alert. We want to make sure we're not just mindful and alert for a few breaths and then off someplace else. We want to *stay* mindful and alert for the whole hour. And then at the end of the hour when you get up, you want to maintain that mindfulness and alertness as long as you're awake.

That requires ardency, the willingness to give energy to the practice with the confidence that if you do it in the proper way, in a skillful way—and that's what ardency is all about, it's not just plain old effort, it's skillful effort—if your effort is skillful, then you gain energy in return. But you first have to be willing to make the investment. That often means going through periods when the effort is not yet skillful, and wondering if it's ever going to get right.

This is where your determination sees you through. In fact, all of the qualities that are called *paramis* or perfections come into play here. The practice is not simply a matter of technique. It requires developing your heart as well as your mind. We think of the heart and mind as two separate things, but in almost all the languages where Buddhism has been practiced, the words for *heart* and *mind* tend to blur into each other. *Citta* in Pali is used in some cases where it means mind, and in some where it means heart.

So you're not just training your mind here, you're training your heart as well. Which means that meditation is not just a matter of techniques, but also a matter of strengthening the inner qualities that allow you to give yourself to the practice in a whole-hearted way, in the hopes that the whole heart and whole mind will benefit.

This is what the teachings about the perfections are all about: They focus on the qualities of the heart and mind that you need to bring to the practice and are going to get developed in the practice. They're an excellent framework for looking at the practice as a lifetime process, not simply what you do when you're on retreat. They're a way of enabling you to answer the question, "What are you going to do with your life? What do you want out of your life?"

When you look back in your life as death is approaching, what do you want to look back on? And what do you want to take with you as a result of having lived this life? If you focus your attention simply on pleasures, you won't have anything at that point—just memories of the pleasures, which may or may not be pleasant memories. Or you may decide that you want to leave your mark, to accomplish something in the world, but that's a pretty risky proposition because the world has its pendulum swings. The efforts you make might come just at the end of a pendulum swing that's going to turn around and wipe out everything you've done.

I once listened to a lawyer who had worked his way up through the government echelons. He'd argued a lot of civil rights cases back in the era when the Supreme Court was liberal. But then he lived long enough to see the pendulum swing back and get conservative again. He lived to see many of the things he had worked for dismantled.