

Perfecting the Mind in an Imperfect World

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We live in an imperfect world.

It doesn't take much to look around you and see that things could be a lot better. This is why we can't wait for a perfect world to come before we can practice. And we can't demand perfect surroundings, a perfect situation, a perfect society, a perfect monastery. We have to make the best of what we've got.

Look here at the monastery. It's the product of generosity. Think of all the generous thoughts and generous actions that have gone into creating this place. And still it's not perfect.

There's no one in charge, as we chanted just now—because acts of generosity have to be allowed a certain amount of freedom.

In fact, the Buddha was very strict about how he would have the monks talk to laypeople about their generosity. Monks are not allowed to hint or scheme, to try to figure out ways to squeeze a little more generosity out of people.

When someone says, "Where should this be given?" the monks can't say, "Well, give it here, give it there." They simply say, "Give where you feel most inspired or where you feel that your gift would be well-used, well cared for."

We certainly can't say, "Don't give to this person, give to that." Or, "Don't give to that monastery, give to this one." Because, as the Buddha said, when you get in the way of people's generosity, you create a lot of bad karma.

Which is why when you look around the monastery, you see things that don't really seem to belong here, or in the best of all possible worlds wouldn't be here. But whatever it is, it's the product of somebody's generosity and you have to honor the freedom they had in giving.

This means that you have to tread very lightly on how imperfect the world is around you. Sometimes the imperfections come from malice, as we see in the world outside. Sometimes the imperfections are there because people meant well but they didn't understand or they didn't really think things through: This applies not just to the monastery but to the world at large. If you try to force people to behave in line with what your ideas are about how things should be run, you usually spark a strong negative reaction.

This is why the Buddha said we shouldn't spend our time hoping to perfect the world. It's never going to be perfected. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to perfect our minds—"perfect" here meaning finding true freedom within the mind.

The principles go together. You allow for freedom to operate outside so you can learn how to develop freedom within. The more you try to control things outside—especially if the control gets unskillful—the more tied up you get inside.

This is why the principle of contentment has two very different dimensions. One is the

dimension dealing with things outside. Any situation where you have the opportunity to practice, you should be content with the level of support you get: the food, clothing, shelter, medicine that are available. Don't get worked up over things when they're not nice; try not to get too attached to them when they are nice. Be careful to the extent of not making it a point of conceit that you're content with things outside.

The Buddha's teachings for contentment are detailed and subtle. The reason you're content is that you want to create as much space in your mind for the practice as possible. The more you get worked up over how things are outside—“This should be that way, that should be this way”—the less and less space there is for you to actually practice.

As for what's going on in the mind, that's where the Buddha said you should not rest content. This was the secret to his awakening. In other words, he didn't allow himself to rest content with skillful qualities.

The only point where he allowed himself contentment was when he'd finally reached awakening, when he'd found the true happiness, the deathless happiness he'd been looking for. Up until that point, there was always that search for something better, looking for ways to improve the quality of his mind.

It started with looking at his actions—thoughts, words, and deeds—on an ordinary everyday level, seeing what kind of impact they had. And looking for the thoughts, words, and deeds that had a good impact: “What kind of mindstates do they come from?” The same with the ones that had a bad impact: “What kind of mindstates do they come from?”

In fact, at one point he said that he got started on the path by learning to make that distinction: looking at his thoughts not so much in terms of their content but more in terms of their role in a process of cause and effect: What did they come from? Where do they lead? Then he learned how to keep the unskillful ones in check and to give free rein to the skillful ones.

But even then, he said, if you give total free rein to your skillful thoughts, the mind gets tired after a while. So even skillful thoughts have their limitations. At that point, the most skillful thing is to find a way of bringing the mind into right concentration.

Now, all of this involves actively cultivating certain mind states and actively trying to check other ones. In other words, we're not here just to watch things come and go.

I was actually reading a book a while back that made a distinction between what the author called right mindfulness practice and right effort practice, as if they were two separate practices. His idea was that right effort is when you try to get rid of unskillful states and foster skillful ones; right mindfulness practice was when you just allow whatever comes up to come up and don't try to interfere with it. That's definitely **WRONG VIEW** in capital letters. The Buddha never taught that kind of mindfulness at all.

Right effort and right mindfulness have to go together. You keep certain things in mind so that you can work on being more and more skillful in your right effort. There's work to be done

inside, and to succeed, you need both qualities working together.

The times when you simply watch are the ones when you don't understand why a certain unskillful mental state is coming up. In cases like that, you want to watch it. But even so, you're not just allowing yourself to get into it as you normally did. You have to step back. You have to develop the quality of mindfulness, the quality of concentration, the quality of discernment so that you can really learn from your unskillful mental states.

It's like back in the days of the Cold War: the people who studied Russian because they wanted to figure out the enemy. Or policemen who watch a suspect for a while to see what he's going to do. They don't watch him just to accept him. They watch him to understand who he's working with, and why.

You've got to watch out for these unskillful states because they really can lead you astray, they really can cause a lot of suffering. You can't just be very blasé about them and say, "Well, I have to be content with everything so I have to be content with the fact that my mind is a mess."

That's not what the Buddha had in mind at all. When the mind is a mess, you want to be able to step back at least a little bit to watch it, to figure out, "Where is this coming from, what's going on here?" That way you come to understand how allowing certain thoughts to come into the mind can create problems down the line.

The only way you're going to get past unskillful states is to understand the process of cause and effect so that when you finally see a particular attitude or a particular belief leading to unskillful states, you realize that it was the cause of the problem.

When you realize that you don't have to hold onto that attitude, you don't have to hold onto that belief, you can drop it. That's when you really let go. That's the combination you need: one, of seeing that the attitude causes suffering, and two, that it's not necessary. You don't have to hold onto it. You don't even have to pick it up.

That's when you gain the discernment that allows you really to let go of things. Otherwise, you tell yourself to let go, let go, let go but you don't really understand, or part of you hasn't really seen that the suffering that you're undergoing is unnecessary. In that case, you can tell yourself to let go all day long and the mind still won't really let go. The attachment is just waiting there in the wings, ready to swoop back in and pick things up again.

If you don't take charge of the situation inside your mind, these thoughts just run rampant, with no one in charge. In the case of the mind, the practice actually offers you the possibility that you could take charge. Otherwise, your defilements are in charge. Greed, anger, and delusion are in charge.

But they don't really have any clear plan for you. Each thought, each emotion has a little bit of a plan for what might lead to happiness, but they're not really organized. This is why you need discernment to point things out to your various desires to make them understand things. Each desire does have a certain rationale behind it, and every desire has the idea that it would

lead to happiness.

This is why you can talk to the desires. This is where you have common ground. You want happiness, they want happiness. But they're all misguided as to what happiness might be and where it might be found.

So this is how you take up the right view that the Buddha taught: to learn how to train your desires. After all, desire is part of the path. Skillful desires come under right effort. So you want to train your desires so that they do have a clear idea of where true happiness might be found. That way you find you gain greater and greater unity in the mind, greater unanimity in the mind. When the mind is working together like this, then it develops a lot of strength.

If you have a lot of unexamined thoughts and unexamined assumptions still sloshing around in the mind, they're going to drag you down. You can't gain awakening simply through force of willpower or blocking things out. That's not what abandoning means. Abandoning means that you let go through understanding.

And understanding requires that you develop the mindfulness and concentration that allow you to watch the mind so that you really can understand the principle of cause and effect, and see exactly where you're handling that principle in an unskillful way.

So even though there are times when you simply have to watch things, the underlying purpose is that you finally understand them and you can let them go.

And then you check again to see if there are other more subtle levels of suffering, more subtle levels of stress that you're still maintaining. That's how the practice develops.

So on the one hand, you learn contentment in terms of your material levels of comfort. And you have to learn how to develop some equanimity around areas of the world where you look at them and say, "That's really sad that that's the way things are." But you have to look at how much effort you would have to put in to change those things and ask yourself, "What would actually happen if I did make that effort? What would be the unintended consequences?"

Some things in the world you can change without any bad side effects, but there are a lot of things in the world that you have to let go. You have to allow them to be. Because otherwise there's no way you're going to be able to train your mind. And your mind is the only thing where you really can take charge and you really can be responsible.

There's a pun in Thai on the word "wat." On the one hand "wat" means monastery, and on the other hand it means your practice, your daily regimen—and particularly the regimen inside the mind.

As Ajaan Fuang used to say, the outside wat, the monastery around us, is something that we work at and we try to keep it well-run and in good shape, but with the understanding that it's never going to be perfect. If you spend too much effort perfecting the outside wat, then the inside wat gets neglected.

So we're working on the inside wat, your inside regimen here—the area where the Buddha

says, “Don’t let yourself rest content.” That doesn’t mean you have to drive yourself to the point where you’re frazzled. Skillful effort means that you learn how to pace yourself, that you know what you’re capable of and push yourself a little bit more and a little bit more. But if you find that the pushing more and more and more is getting worse results, then you back off a bit. You say, “Well, I’m not ready for that.” That’s not something you can squeeze, that you can pull on.

Like Ajaan Than’s image is of planting rice. If you’re not content that the rice plants are growing as fast as you like, then you pull, pull, pull on them to make them taller, and of course what you do is you pull them out of the ground. They die.

Instead, you learn how to pace yourself with the thought in mind that if there’s some way you can learn how to develop greater strength, the practice will go more quickly. The results will be more solid.

So you look for various ways to give yourself more strength: strength in your conviction, strength in your effort, strength in your mindfulness, strength in your concentration and discernment—so that you’re capable of more.

In other words, you accept responsibility. That’s the kind of acceptance that the Buddha really does encourage. On the outside level, you accept the way things are, but on the inside level you accept the fact that you have some powers to make some changes here. And you want to develop those powers as much as you can, as wisely as you can, as effectively as you can.

Because that’s where the practice of right effort really pays off. As the Buddha said, a deathless happiness is a possibility. It’s something that human beings can do. Try to see that as the most tantalizing thing that a human being can do, and order your other priorities in line with that.