

Basic Wisdom

June 8, 2012

The word “Dhamma” that we use for the Buddha’s teachings has other meanings as well. And one of the most important ones, one that’s often overlooked, is action. Dhamma means action. And that’s what the Buddha’s teachings are all about: your actions in terms of what you do with your body, what you do with your speech, what you do with your mind, and the actions that the Buddha recommends you do and not do.

He recommends that you be generous, that you observe the precepts, and you develop good qualities in the mind through mindfulness and meditation, partly because these actions give rise to good results, and partly because he wants you to become sensitive to what you’re doing— because this is the big issue in life.

We’re constantly doing, doing, doing things, and some place in the back of the mind we know that it’s all for the sake of happiness, for the sake of pleasure or well-being. Yet all too often we’re doing things that create suffering and stress. The Buddha wants you to be sensitive to that, because it’s in being sensitive to your actions that you develop wisdom and discernment.

There are basically three principles he wants you to notice. One is that your actions have results. There’s a connection between things you do and the pleasure and pain you experience. And by trying to be more skillful in your actions, you begin to see some of these relationships for yourself. If you haven’t been generous, well, try being generous and see what it does for your life. If you haven’t been observing the precepts, try observing the precepts. See the changes they make—or if you’ve already been observing the precepts, try to be more meticulous in how you do that. Extend the idea of precepts not only to the five or eight precepts. but also to the restraint of your senses. Every time you look, listen, taste, touch: What’s the motivation? What’s the purpose for your looking or tasting, touching or listening? If you see any unskillful the motivations, try to look in a different way, and see what an impact that has on your mind.

The same with the use of the requisites: Every time you put on clothes, remind yourself of the proper motive for wearing clothes. And then look at how you're dressing. Does it fit in line with the proper motive? Or are you overdressing? Underdressing?

When you eat food, when you go in and out of your shelter, ask yourself, "Why are you doing this? What's the motive?" And if you're the person buying the food or buying the things to go in the shelter, ask yourself each time you buy, "What's this for? Is this going to make it a better place to meditate? Or is it actually going to get in the way?"

Or if you've been observing the five precepts, try taking on the eight precepts. This is actually one of the ways of adding restraint of the senses to the five precepts. All the precepts that are added in going from five to eight have to do with placing some control over your eyes and ears and nose and tongue and body.

If you can't take the eight precepts on a continual basis, at least try it one or two days every week. See what happens. You'll begin to notice that some actions have results that are preferable to others. That's the second main principle about action. Not only do actions have results, but some actions are more skillful than others, in that they give better results.

This principle goes all the way from your outside actions into the meditation. You notice that some ways of focusing on the breath get better results than others. Or the way you relate to your object: In the beginning, you have to think about it again and again and again and keep reminding yourself to come back, evaluating it until it becomes comfortable. But once it gets comfortable enough, you don't have to do that activity. You can drop some of that directed thought and evaluation and just *be* with the sensation of the breath coming and going out. There's a sense of upwelling energy in the body and you can just sit there bathing in it.

If the upwelling energy is getting a little too oppressive, you want something that's more calm. More refined. This is a way of applying the insight that some actions are preferable to others. In particular, it develops a sensitivity to the fact that the more refined the action, the more refined and the more solid the results.

That's a principle that can take you through concentration practice all the way to the end.

The one spot where it gets a little bit different is something of a logical extension: If really refined fabrication, really refined action is preferable to grosser action, how about no action at all? And it turns out there is a way you can get the mind to the point where there is no intention whatsoever. That opens you up to something that's even more radical than the gradations of refinement. So it may be a logical step, but it's also a radically different step.

Still, it comes down to that same principle of noticing that some actions are preferable to others because they give a more refined sense of wellbeing, more peaceful sense of wellbeing. That's the second main principle.

The third main principle in basic wisdom or basic discernment about action is that once you've seen that some actions are more skillful than others, it's not the case that you'll immediately jump to the more skillful side. For one reason or another, you might still like the unskillful action, even though you know full well that it's going to lead to suffering down the line. That's where you need the third principle of wisdom, or discernment, which is knowing how to talk yourself into doing the more skillful alternative.

In some cases it's not a problem. If you like the action and it is more skillful, it's very easy to drop the unskillful side. But suppose you don't like the skillful action. Even though you know it's going to give good results, you may not like doing it. Or if there's an action you like doing but you know it's going to lead to unskillful results. That's when your discernment has to focus on working on your motivation and on figuring out what's going to work in your case—because this is something that varies from person to person: the reasons that will induce you to want to do the skillful thing.

This is where discernment comes together with right effort. Sometimes, to get you motivated, the Buddha has you develop a sense of heedfulness. Sometimes he has you develop a sense of pride, pride in your craftsmanship as a meditator. Sometimes he has you develop a sense of shame and compunction. Shame means realizing that you really wouldn't want other people to know what

you're doing. Or when you think about it on your own, in your more sober moments you feel ashamed of doing certain things. Compunction is when you realize that you really wouldn't want to cause harm, to yourself or anybody else, and so you want to avoid that harm.

This is connected with the quality of ardency. The two words in Pali are very similar: compunction, *ottappa*; ardency, *atappa*. And in both cases, it's a matter of wanting to avoid the results of unskillful actions.

So there are various ways you can motivate yourself. It's a matter of learning your own psychology, to see what works: whether it's an element of pride—wanting to do something well, taking pride in your craftsmanship—or heedfulness. However you motivate yourself, you've got to figure out what works in your particular case.

This is why discernment is not a matter of wise sayings that are printed out in books or slogans you carry around all the time in your mind. It's a sensitivity right now, in particular cases, to what you're doing and what works—what gets better results, and how you can motivate yourself to do what's really skillful. Once you've got those three principles in mind, you understand what this practice is all about. They work from the blatant to the very subtle levels. They're basic principles, but you can carry them all the way through.

A common example is people who've reached a state of oneness in their meditation and somehow they think they've reached a ground of being or some innate nature. To get past that, the Buddha has you ask yourself, Okay, what are you doing right now? What's the mind doing? What are the perceptions that keep you there? What are the fabrications that keep you there? Can you see them as a disturbance?

The same principle operates in the teachings on breath meditation. The Buddha gets you sensitive to the breathing and then sensitive to the effect that the breathing has in the body. He gets you sensitive to feelings of pleasure, the energy of rapture, and the perceptions that go around rapture. Sometimes rapture can be perceived as something really pleasant and positive, and sometimes the same sensation can freak people out.

You'll notice the effect that the perceptions and feelings have on your mind, and then you try to calm that effect down, just as you calm the effect of the breath. In every case, it's a pattern of sensitizing yourself to your actions and then calming things down. Underlying that is the conviction, and heedfulness, based the motivation by which you tell yourself you really would rather not suffer. You really would like to see the end of suffering.

This is how our practice of generosity, virtue, and meditation leads to wisdom and discernment. And it's how the wisdom and discernment lead to the end of suffering. They're embodied in the four noble truths. Craving leads to suffering. That's an issue of action and result. The path leads to the end of suffering. That's another action and result. And you see the path as preferable to the craving, because the results are on different levels.

Then you figure out that the best way to develop the path is to comprehend the stress and suffering, which may be something you don't normally do. When you comprehend what's lying at the basis of suffering—what comes together with the suffering—you realize there's craving. That's something you abandon. In doing this, you develop the path, all the good qualities that need to be developed, all the unskillful things that need to be abandoned. So ultimately you realize the end of suffering.

These four truths come from those basic principles that actions have results, some results are preferable to other, and you know how to motivate yourself to choose the preferable and more skillful alternative. It's all very basic and it's all very practical.

But a lot of people would prefer the kind of Buddhist wisdom that makes your mind snap, that throws your thoughts in a blender and whirls them around. Like I was reading today about the precept on sex, that ultimately you want the mind to get to the point where there is no refraining and there is no no-refraining—as if that was some sort of advance. You can't clone awakening by trying to jump over the steps. You have to back up and see that certain actions are unskillful. They really do cause harm. Other actions are more skillful and cause less harm. If you follow that principle through all the way to the end, that's when you really benefit from the Buddha's teachings, because you've developed your own discernment in the right area. And put it to good use.