

Watch What You're Doing

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“Days and nights fly past, fly past: What am I doing right now?”

The Buddha has you ask that question every day, both to keep yourself from being complacent and to remind yourself that the practice is one of *doing*. Even though we're sitting here very still, there's still a doing going on in the mind. There's the intention to focus on the breath, the intention to maintain that focus, and the intention to keep watch over how the breath and the mind are behaving. Meditation as a whole is a doing. Even when you practice non-reactivity or “being the knowing,” there's still an element of intention. That's what the doing is.

That was one of the Buddha's most important insights: that even when you're sitting perfectly still with the intention not to do anything, there's still the intention, and the intention itself is a doing. It's a *sankhara*, a fabrication. It's what we live with all the time. In fact, all of our experience is based on fabrication. The fact that you sense your body, feelings, perceptions, thought-constructs, consciousness—all of these aggregates: To be able to experience them in the present moment you have to fabricate a potential into an actual aggregate. You fabricate the potential for form into an actual experience of form, the potential for feeling into an actual experience of feeling, and so on. This element of fabrication lies in the background all the time. It's like the background noise of the Big Bang, which hums throughout the whole universe and doesn't go away. The element of fabrication is always there, shaping our experience, and it's so consistently present that we lose sight of it. We don't realize what we're doing.

What you're trying to do as you meditate is to strip things down so you can see the very elemental fabrications going on in the mind, the kamma you're creating with every moment. We're not making the mind still simply to have a nice restful place to be, a nice experience of ease to soothe our stressed-out nerves. That may be part of it, but it's not the whole practice. The other part is to see clearly what's going on, to see the potential of human action: What are we doing all the time? What are the potentials contained in this doing? Then we apply that understanding of human action to see how far we can go in stripping away the unnecessary stress and suffering that come from acting in unskillful ways.

It's important that we always keep this in mind as we meditate. Remember: We're here to understand human action, in particular our own human actions. Otherwise we sit here hoping that we don't have to do anything, that we can just wait for some Imax experiences to come whap us upside the head, or some nice glowing sense of oneness to come welling up inside. And sometimes things like that *can* come unexpectedly, but if they come without your understanding how or why they came, they're not all that helpful. They're restful for a while, or amazing for a while, but then they go away and you have to deal with your desire to get them back. And, of course, no amount of desire is going to get them back if it's not accompanied by understanding.

You can't totally drop human action until you understand the nature of action. This is really important. We like to think that we can simply stop doing, stop doing, stop doing, and things will settle down, get calm, and open up to emptiness. But that's more like zoning out than meditating. There *is* an element of stopping in the meditation, an element of letting go, but you can't really master it until you understand what you're trying to stop, what you're letting go. So try to watch out for that. When you come out of a good meditation, don't simply get up and go back to the kitchen, have a cocoa, and go back to sleep. Reflect on what you did so as to understand the pattern of cause and effect, to see exactly what you fabricated in the process of bringing the mind down to a state of calm. After all, the path *is* a fabricated path. It's the ultimate fabrication. As the Buddha said, of all the fabricated phenomena there are in the world, the highest is the noble eightfold path. This is the path we're trying to follow right now. It's something put together, and you won't understand it until you see the putting-together in as you're doing it.

So always have that in the back of your mind: that you are doing something here. Sometimes it seems frustrating that the whole hour may be spent just pulling back, pulling back, pulling the mind back to the breath. It wanders off, so you pull it back again, and then it wanders—*when* is the peace and calm going to come? Well, before it can come you have to develop some understanding. So when you pull it back, try to understand what you're doing. When it wanders off, try to understand what's happening, what you did to encourage or allow it to wander off. In particular, try to uncover all the skillful and unskillful intentions that go into this back-and-forth process. When you understand how the mind goes back and forth, you'll reach the point where you can keep it from going back and forth. At the same time, you'll develop the kind of insight we want in the meditation: insight into actions.

The Buddha said discernment involves comprehending the process of fabrication, the process of action that's going on in the mind all the time. And all the basic building blocks of action are right here. There's the physical fabrication

that leads to action—in other words, the breath. Without the breath you couldn't do any other physical actions at all. Then there's verbal fabrication: directed thought and evaluation. Without those you wouldn't be able to speak. And then there's mental fabrication: perceptions and feelings. Without those, the process of mental fabrication wouldn't have any building blocks to build with. These are all the most basic forms of activity: physical, verbal, and mental. So we bring them all together right here when we've got the mind with the breath. We're focused on the breath, directing our thoughts to the breath, evaluating the breath, aware of all the mental labels that label the breath, and all the feelings that come with the breath, pleasant or unpleasant. All the basic building blocks are right here.

These building blocks are not things, they're activities. You might call them basic activity units. These are the things you have to bring together in order to get the mind to settle down. Otherwise it goes off and elaborates all kinds of other worlds to inhabit, pulling its attention away from the basic activity units and hoping to live in their end-products. So you keep reminding yourself to come back to this level, this level, this level where things are basic, and you try to manipulate these things skillfully so as to still the mind. It's an intentional stilling, so there's an element of doing even in the being still, but it's a doing for the purpose of knowing. Most of our doing is for the purpose of ignorance. It comes out of ignorance and heads toward ignorance, covering up our intentions so that we can forget the effort that goes into the doing and simply enjoy the end-product experiences that our doing creates.

Some people think that Buddhism is a religion of experiences. We want to have a religious experience when we come here, we want to have an experience of release or an experience of peace. Actually, though, the Dhamma is meant to take us beyond our incessant habit of producing and consuming experiences. And to do that, we have to understand the nature of action that underlies the producing and consuming, to see exactly what it is to be a human being who acts. What does it mean to act? How does the mind act? What is an intention? Why does the mind have intentions? Are these processes really pleasant or are they burdensome? What would it be like if we didn't have to do them? We need to look into these things, we need to understand these processes before we can get to where we really want to go. If you don't understand human action, you won't be able to explore the full limits of human action. You won't be able to understand how far human action can take you. So we're here to study, we're here to learn from our actions.

This teaching on action is something particular to the Buddha's teachings—this sense of what an action is and how far an action can go. It's easy to say that all the great religions focus on having experiences beyond what words can describe. Sounds nice. Very friendly. Very ecumenical. But when you compare

what the various religions say about action—what it means to act, what the potentials of human action are—you see that they differ greatly. Some teachings say that we don't really act at all, that there's an outside force acting through us, that everything's pre-determined. Others say that we do act, but our actions have no real consequences. Or that there are lots of limitations on what we can do to produce true happiness, so we need some outside power to help us. You can't lump these various teachings on action together and pretend that the differences don't count. The fact is: They don't jibe. They're diametrically opposed. They get in one another's way.

This was why the early Buddhists kept insisting that the teaching on action was what set Buddhism apart, that it was the most important issue where people have to make a choice and take a stand. And this was why the Buddha's last words were that we need to be heedful. He didn't end his teaching career with some nice platitudes on emptiness or nibbana. He said to be heedful—to see our actions as important and to keep that importance in mind at all times.

So this is where you have to make a choice: Which theory of action are you planning to place your hopes on? That's what you're asked to commit to when you take refuge in the Triple Gem: the teaching on action, the teaching on kamma. Taking refuge is not a warm, fuzzy, cowardly cop-out. It's the act of taking on full responsibility for your choices and intentions. How far are you planning to go with your actions? How far are you willing to push the envelope? These are questions that we all have to answer for ourselves, and no one can force the answer on us. But just remember: The Buddha said that it's possible for human action to go to the end of action—in other words, to go to a dimension in the mind where ultimately there is no more intention. He says that that's the highest happiness. Now, we can take that statement merely as an historical curiosity or we can take that as a personal challenge. It's up to us.

At the very least, when you're sitting here meditating and things don't seem to be going right, don't blame it on the weather. Don't blame it on the time of day. Just look at what you're doing. Look at the raw material you have to work with and your skill in fashioning that raw material into a state of calm. From the Buddhist point of view, that raw material comes from past actions. You can't change the fact that this is the raw material you have at hand, but you *can* fashion that raw material in different ways. That freedom of choice is always present. So if things aren't going well in your meditation, look at your intentions to see what you might change. Look at your perceptions, at the questions you're posing in the mind. Experiment. Improvise. See what makes a difference.

When things *are* going well, try to maintain them well. See how you can develop that sense of wellness even further. This is Right Effort. This is where we encounter the element of intention, the element of action directly in our own

minds. If you sit here complaining about how things aren't going well in your meditation, that's your choice: You chose to complain. Is that the most skillful thing to do? If it's not, try something else. You've always got that freedom.

When things are going well, you can always choose to get complacent. If you get complacent, where does that take you? You can choose to manipulate things too much, too little, or just right. The choices are here. It's important that we keep that in mind. Otherwise we find ourselves trapped in a particular situation and can't think our way out, because we don't realize the range of available possibilities.

Try to keep your sense of those possibilities as alive as possible, so that the doing of the meditation becomes a skillful doing and not just a thrashing around. You observe, you watch, you look into this question: "What does it mean to have an intention? How can I see the results of my intentions? Where do they show their results?" They show their results both in your state of mind and in your breathing, so look right here, make your adjustments right here.

And even if you're not consciously thinking about the nature of human action, you're learning a lot about your own actions as you work with the breath, trying to keep the mind with the breath, trying to make the breath a good place for the mind to stay. You're muddling around here in the basic elements of human action, like a young kid fooling around with a guitar: After a while, if the kid is observant, the fooling around turns into music. The more observant you are in the way you relate to the breath, the more your muddling around will turn into a process of discovery.