

Shaping Your Life

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One of the Thai idioms for meditating is “making an effort.” And the effort is precisely in being very careful about your intentions. Actually, we’re always shaping our experience by our intentions, and there’s quite a lot of effort right there to begin with. What we’re doing in the effort of the meditation is to be more careful about our intentions, more careful about how we’re shaping things.

One of the most radical discoveries in meditation is exactly how much you’re already doing. We tend to have an attitude that we’re like people watching TV: totally passive, everything is already provided, it’s simply our duty to watch. The present moment is something ready-made and we’re simply consumers, watchers, spectators.

But that’s not the case. We’re shaping things from the very beginning—both through our past actions and through our present actions, what we’re doing right now. We take the materials coming in from the past and we shape them into the present. So we’re already making an effort, we’re already doing something. Now we want to do that as skillfully as possible, because the way we shape the present moment affects not only the present moment, but it has ramifications that go on into the future. So you want to be very mindful about where you’re being skillful and where you’re not.

When the Buddha gave his first instructions to his son, who at the time was only seven years old, it came down to the issue of being very careful about your intentions: looking at your intentions before you act, looking at the results of your actions while you’re doing them. If you notice anything unskillful, stop; if not, continue. And then look at the results of your actions after they’re done. If you’ve caused harm in ways that you hadn’t expected, talk it over with other people who are further along on the path, and then resolve not to repeat that mistake.

This willingness to admit our own mistakes and to change our ways is a very important part of the practice. If we can’t change our ways, there’s no purpose in practicing at all. This is why the Buddha said that his one requirement for someone to practice the Dhamma with was that the person be honest and open: in other words, someone who admits mistakes readily. Because it’s the only that you’re going to learn, both from other people who you talk to about your mistakes and from watching cause and effect in your own actions.

We may think that this teaching is simply about external actions but it also applies to what we’re doing in the mind. The way you’re focusing on the breath right now has an impact on how you’re experiencing the breath. Your concepts about the breath, your concepts about what it means to be focused, your intention in being with the breath: All of these things shape the breath, shape your experience of the breath. You want to get sensitive to them so that you can notice when you’ve made a mistake, and you can correct it as quickly as possible.

Otherwise, the effort we put into the present moment becomes more and more and more of a burden if we're not careful. What we're trying to do here is lighten our burdens.

This is why the meditation is called practice. You read books on practicing swimming, say, or practicing a musical instrument. When they describe the process of what it means to practice these skills in an effective way, they always focus on looking for how you're doing things in an inefficient way, expending more energy than you really have to and getting less results than you should. So learn to let go of as much misunderstanding, as much inefficiency, as much lack of mindfulness as you can. That's why we say we practice.

Often our problem is that we tend to carry things around from the past. Psychologists say that the sense of self is strongest around areas where we felt we've been wronged in the past. We tend to hold on to those stories more tightly than perhaps anything else in our experience. And they place a huge weight on us. The more we carry this baggage around, the less good we can do in the present moment. We don't have the energy.

In Pali, they have the word *upadhi*, which can be translated as belongings, paraphernalia. The original image is of nomadic tribes and all the stuff they would carry around. That was their *upadhi*: their tents, their belongings. If you're a nomadic tribe, of course, you want to keep those things as light as possible, take only what is really necessary.

You see this principle reflected in the life of the monks. Monks are supposed to keep their possessions to a minimum. The ideal monk described in the Canon is someone who carries only the minimum number of robes, his begging bowl, just what's necessary for his survival. Everything else, he leaves behind. The Buddha says he's like a bird that takes its wings as its only burden. In other words, the things that allow it to move: That's its burden. It tries to keep everything else trimmed away.

This principle applies not only in terms of physical or material things, but also in terms of your mind. Look at all the baggage you carry around. Try to eliminate, as much as you can, the stuff you've dragged in from the past. There are lessons to be learned from the past, but often we carry a lot of unnecessary stuff around. So do your best to let go of that old baggage.

That way, you can give more energy to the present moment, to shape the present moment properly. And through the present moment you shape the future in a way that's really skillful, causes less and less suffering for yourself, less and less suffering for the people around you—always mindful of the fact that the way you experience the present moment is a doing. There's an effort that goes into it. It's a skill that can be developed. It starts with the very basics of how we approach our experience: the way we breathe, the way we approach our breath, the way we approach everything.

We're not here just to practice with the breath. We take the breath as a foundation but we're also practicing other aspects of what's good in our lives. I was recently translating a talk by Ajaan Lee. He refers over and over again to people who come to the monastery, he says, to develop their goodness, to build their goodness. That includes not only your goodness as you

meditate, but also your goodness in everything you do. If you're eager to develop your goodness, you find more and more opportunities to do it. If you're grudging, then you're just placing limitations on yourself.

So the goodness is not just in the meditation, it's in everything. You take the meditation, you take the breath as your basis for the way you approach everything. That gives you the strength needed to do goodness in other areas as well. But it's not just the meditation. Everything we do while we're here should be devoted to developing goodness in all areas, because we're training the whole mind.

That way, our effort in shaping the present, no matter what the present is—whether we're sitting here with our eyes closed or working around the monastery doing chores, helping in various ways—is all of a piece. The way you approach the meditation should connect with the way you approach other aspects of life; and the way you approach other aspects of life will have an impact on your meditation. So try to keep it all as seamless as possible. After all, it is the same mind. No matter what the situation, you want to develop the same qualities all throughout the day, so that the effort you put into shaping your life here is consistently as skillful as possible.

It's in developing this skill that you gain a lot of insight, unexpected insights. Insights don't come only when you're sitting here with your eyes closed. They can come at unexpected times of the day, so you want to be attentive to what you're doing throughout the day. The more you focus on being skillful in what you do, the more likely the insights are to come—the insights that lighten your load, that lighten the load of the people around you.

Ultimately, you get to that point where you can see what it's like not to have an intention in the present moment, when everything reaches a point of equilibrium and another dimension opens up. That's where this is all aimed. Think of your whole life, everything you do, as aiming in that direction.

Then, as Ajaan Fuang said in his talk the other night, our life isn't divided up into times: the time to do this, the time to go into town, the time to work on this, the time to sit and meditate. If it's all chopped up like that, then it doesn't gain any momentum. But if it's timeless, though—the pursuit of skill in how you shape the present moment—then it all comes together.