

## *Unlearning Unskillful Behavior*

*April 14, 2011*

When you read the autobiographies of the forest ajaans, it's hard not to be struck about how many times they make vows in their practice. They stay up all night to accomplish something. They're very much goal oriented, and goal directed—which can often be a sharp contrast to the way people are taught to practice here: “Simply be in the present moment, have no expectations, have no goals.” But if you're going to take the practice on as a lifelong practice, you've *got* to have goals. You've got to have reasons. You've got to have hopes that it's going to go to a good place. Once you've chosen a wise goal, you have to learn how to relate to it wisely as well. And a lot of that means not getting discouraged by setbacks.

I heard a story once about a Zen master in the Midwest who had a student who was going to come here to the West Coast, to try his luck at Hollywood. The Zen master asked him, “What are you going to do if they knock you down?” And the guy said, “Well, probably just except it that that's my karma.” And the Zen master said, “No. They knock you down, you get back up again. They knock you down a second time, you get back up again a second time. If this is something you really want, do everything you can to get there.” That's the attitude you have to take in the practice. You can't let setbacks knock you off course or discourage you.

Instead, learn to look at your behavior and ask yourself, “Okay, what needs to be changed? What needs to be redirected?” Build on your strengths, but also be very honest about your weaknesses, and think about what you can do to overcome those weaknesses.

There are those four aspects of right effort: abandoning unskillful states that have already arisen, preventing unskillful states that haven't yet arisen from arising, giving rise to skillful states, and then, once a skillful state has been brought into being, you try to maintain it and develop it. That second one—preventing unskillful states from arising—is one that tends to get sloughed over too much because it does involve planning. You have to learn how to look at yourself and see: Where are your unskillful habits most easily provoked? Anticipate that you're going to have those situations again, and ask yourself: What are you going to do? You've got to plan.

This is one aspect of the practice that really is future-oriented. You take into account the past, and you ask yourself: “When I go in this particular situation, when I meet with these particular people, they know where my buttons are. What

can I do to make sure they don't push those buttons? Or if they do push the buttons, how can I learn how to react in a more skillful way?" Then think about people who've been in similar situations, and have behaved in a skillful way.

For many of us, the problem is we don't have very good examples. This is why living with a teacher is important. If the teacher is good, the teacher will set good examples, the sorts of things you can't learn in a book. But if you don't have that kind of person around all the time, then you do have to look in books sometimes. This is why, in the past, people encouraged their children to read literature, especially back in the days when literature taught you about people who had faced obstacles and overcome them. They wanted you to read about real heroes and heroines to get an idea about how you might face your own obstacles and overcome them as well.

So it's often a useful practice—if you know that you're going to go into a situation where you tend to react in an unskillful way—to tell yourself at the beginning of a meditation, "At the end of the meditation, I'm going to think about this." Get that image firmly in mind: what the situation is, what the problem is, what your unskillful reactions have been, why you engage in them. Just pose that question in the mind, and then drop it to the side. Focus on the breath. Try to get the mind as concentrated and still as you can. If any nibblings of that thought come up in the course of the hour, say, "No, not yet, not yet. Wait until the mind is in better shape."

And then, at the end of the hour, give yourself some time to think it through, and see what ideas you come up with. Some of them may be pretty flimsy strategies, but at least you're starting in the right direction. You're recognizing a real problem and you're doing what you can to work toward a solution. There's no guarantee that the meditation will give you an instant or trustworthy insight. But if you work through different scenarios enough, you can come up with some that, at the very least, remind you that, "If so and so says this, you just keep quiet, don't react regardless." And if the mind says, "Well, it sounds like I'm going to lose out to them," say, "No, you're going to lose out to your defilements if you react. It's much worse to lose out to your defilements than to lose out to other people."

The same principle applies to your meditation. If you know you have certain problems focusing on the breath, focusing on getting the breath to be comfortable, ask yourself, "In what ways am I conceiving this problem in a way that's keeping me trapped?" I was talking recently to someone who was of the opinion that you had to get the breath energy really nice all the way throughout the body before you could think of spreading your awareness to fill the body. Now, that kind of assumption really traps you. If you can't get certain parts of the

body to feel comfortable, then you can't really spread your awareness. There are bound to be times when sections of the body just don't respond. And allowing your awareness to spread, being conscious of the awareness that's already there, can actually help you overcome the problem. But if you tie your hands and say, "I can't spread my awareness there until the breath is good," you keep yourself hobbled.

So if you come up with a problem, ask yourself: "Is the way I conceive the problem, the problem itself? How about flipping it around, turning it inside out?" See if you get some new way of thinking about it.

If you're meditating and you've made up your mind that you're going to sit for a certain amount of time, and all of a sudden a certain thought defeats you, think about how you might get around that thought the next time, so that it doesn't.

This approach applies to all areas of life: addictions, problems in meditation, problems with people. You can't just push these things off to the side and hope that just by getting the technique of the meditation down, you're going to make those problems disappear. That's called spiritual bypassing, and it doesn't work. You can't bypass the everyday problems of how you engage with other people, how you engage with addictions, attachments, all your unskillful habits. You've got to think them through.

Think of the situations in which you tend to be unskillful, and then pose that question in the mind: "What would be a better way of dealing with these? Why am I tempted to behave in an unskillful way? What would be a better way?" That way, you're engaged in right effort—and right mindfulness, too.

So many people misunderstand mindfulness as meaning simply being aware of whatever comes up, and accepting whatever comes up. The Buddha's definition was different, though: Mindfulness for him was keeping something in mind, keeping in mind what you've done, and the results you've experienced from what you've done. And also keeping in mind that you want to learn how to do it more skillfully. Then, based on that, you try to figure things out.

So that's one of the ways in which dealing in past and future is an important part of the meditation. Thinking is an important part of the meditation. You're expanding your range of possibilities. You're learning how to abort unskillful habits. And as you work on some of the more blatant ones, the subtler ones become easier. The spiritual bypassing approach is: "Let's deal with the subtle ones, and the blatant ones will just take care of themselves." But it rarely happens that way. If you're insensitive about things that you're blatantly doing in life, how are you going to muster the sensitivity to deal with your subtler attachments inside?

So if you see that you have an unskillful habit or an unskillful reaction that happens over and over again, sit down and think it through. Try to think of good examples you've seen in the past of people who have handled that situation well. Try to think of ways of thinking that will counteract your typical rationalizations for why you have to act in that way. Use the past as your lesson book, and set goals for the future.

It's all basic common sense, but all too often people throw their common sense away when they come to meditate. So remember that the teachings are a very consistent form of common sense, working on what is your responsibility, and putting aside things that are not your responsibility. Your unskillful habits are your responsibility, so do whatever you need to do to overcome them.