

The Buddha's Shoulds

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Right concentration forms the heart of the path. The other factors of the path serve two functions. One is to get you into concentration; the other is to make sure you don't get stuck there. In other words, concentration on its own is a state of becoming that's useful on the path. Even though you eventually want to go beyond all states of becoming, if you don't first master this state of becoming you'll be wandering around in other states of becoming where it would be hard to see what's going on in the mind. As the Buddha said, when your mind is concentrated you can see the four noble truths as they actually come to be. When it's not concentrated, you can't see these things clearly. Non-concentration, he says, is a miserable path, leading nowhere useful at all.

So concentration is the essential factor. Only when the mind is stable and still can it really see what's going on inside. To get into right concentration, you need the other path factors: right view all the way up through right mindfulness. Right view starts with conviction in the principle of kamma, that there are good and bad actions that give good and bad results—not only in this lifetime but also in future lifetimes—and that there are people who really know these things from direct experience. It's not just a theory.

What's interesting here is that when the Buddha presents this introduction to his teaching on kamma, he focuses on two types of good actions to stress their importance: gratitude to your parents and generosity. These things really do have merit; they really do have value. The fact that your parents gave birth to you was not just a set of impersonal processes that just happened to happen. It's not the case that you don't owe any debt of gratitude to your parents for having gone through all the pain of giving birth to you and then raising you once you were born. There really is a personal debt there. They made choices, sometimes difficult choices, that allowed for your survival. Generosity is one of the ways you pay off that debt, and it's also one of the valuable ways you interact well with other beings, benefiting both them and yourself in the process.

The Buddha's attitude towards generosity is instructive. He's very clear on the fact that when he's telling you what you should do, the "should" is based on a condition. After all, the Buddha didn't create you. You might resist his shoulds with the thought, "Who is he to tell me what to do?"

Years back I was sitting in on a course on the Metta Sutta. The first line in the Metta Sutta starts: "This is what should be done by one who aims at a state of peace." As the teacher started out with that line, a hand immediately shot up. A

man sitting in the class said, “I thought Buddhism didn’t have any shoulds.” And they spent the rest of the morning going back and forth over that one issue.

Actually, Buddhism does have a lot of shoulds. You look at the Dhammapada and you’ll see that it’s full of shoulds. But each should is based on a condition, as in the first line of the Metta Sutta: “This is what should be done by one who aims at a state of peace.” The Buddha doesn’t tell you that you have to aim at a state of peace, or that you have to want true happiness. That’s your choice. But if that *is* what you want, this is what you’ve got to do. The nature of cause and effect is such that these are the practices you have to follow. The Buddha isn’t saying, “Well, this is what worked for me and it may work for you, but I’m not sure, so you have to find your own way.” That’s not what he would say. He’d say, “This is what works if you’re aiming at this goal.” And it’s up to you to decide whether you want to aim at that goal. If you do, then you’ve got to do it this way.

There’s a passage where King Pasenadi comes to visit the Buddha, and his first question is, “Where should a gift be given?” The Buddha responds, “Wherever you feel inspired.” In other words, there are no shoulds in this area aside from your own sense of inspiration—where you feel the gift would be well used or where you just want to give. There are no restraints placed on the act of generosity at all. But then the King follows up with another question: “Where, when a gift is given, does it bear great fruit?” And the Buddha says, “That’s a different question.” This is where the principle of cause and effect kicks in, placing its imperatives. You have to give to someone whose mind is pure or to an institution where the people are being trained to make their minds pure—i.e., the Sangha—if you want your gift to bear great fruit.

So there *are* shoulds in the Buddha’s teachings, but they’re based on the principle of what actually works for the purpose of true happiness. As for what you want to do with your life, there’s no imposition there at all. It’s your choice. But once you appreciate the principle of generosity and see that it is really worthwhile, you’ve made the choice to get started on the path. As the Buddha said, it’s impossible for someone who is stingy to attain jhana, to attain any of the noble attainments.

So you start with the principle that generosity is good and that your actions matter. When you dig a little bit deeper into the principle of action, you realize that your intentions are what matter in your actions. This insight leads to the next step in the path: right resolve. You want to avoid intentions that would make it difficult to get the mind into concentration, so you want to learn how to go beyond being resolved on sensual passion, being resolved on ill will, being resolved on harmfulness—because all these things stir up the mind and interfere with its settling down.

There's a passage in the Canon where Prince Jayasena, walking for exercise through a forest one day, comes across a novice staying in a little wilderness hut. He says to the novice, "I hear that when the monks really apply themselves, they can get their minds into a state of one-pointedness. Is that true?" And the novice says, "Yes." And the prince says, "Well, explain it to me." And the novice, who probably knew the prince's reputation, says, "You wouldn't understand." The prince responds, "Well, I just might." So the novice replies, "In that case, I'll explain it to you, but if you don't understand, don't harass me with more questions, okay?" So the prince agrees. But when the novice explains it to him, the prince says, "That's impossible. Nobody can get their minds concentrated like that." He gets up and leaves. The novice then goes to see the Buddha and tells him what happened. And the Buddha says, "What did you expect? That person is immersed in sensual passion, on fire with sensual fever, being chewed up by his sensual thoughts: How would he understand anything like this—something that has to be attained through renunciation?"

This is why the Buddha has you put sensual passion aside, for it prevents the mind from getting concentrated. It prevents you from even conceiving of the possibility of getting concentrated. Similarly with ill will and harmfulness: If you hold ill will for somebody, if you want to be harmful to that person, then as soon as the mind settles down to be quiet in the present moment, those thoughts are sure to flare up. They obsess you. So the Buddha has you resolve to put them aside.

When you want to act on those right resolves, this is where right action, right speech, and right livelihood come in. Some people find the Buddha's precepts too hard to follow; other people say they're not inclusive enough. The ones who say that they're not inclusive enough insist that we have to be more responsible. If there's a precept against killing, you shouldn't be able to eat meat. If there's a precept against stealing, you shouldn't abuse the earth's resources. They make the precepts bigger and bigger and bigger all the time to the point where they become impossible, too big to be fully put into practice. Or in some cases it *is* possible to practice them fully, but the Buddha said it wasn't necessary to go that far. We're working on the precepts that help the mind get concentrated, which is why they go only as far as they do. In other words, you don't want to act on an unskillful intention and you don't want to tell other people to act on those intentions. But as far as breaches of the precepts where you don't know what's happening or it's not intentional, those don't count. After all, the intention is the important part of concentration, and you want to train the mind to master its intentions in areas where you have some control over your life and over your actions.

Once you've created this context for the practice, you're in a better position to follow the parts of the path that deal directly with right concentration.

First there's right effort, which means generating the desire to get rid of unskillful qualities of the mind—i.e., the things that get in the way of concentration, like the hindrances—and then to give rise to skillful qualities, like the factors for Awakening. This is an area where desire is a useful part of the path. It gives you the energy you need to work on the mind and to realize that you've got to make choices. There are skillful and unskillful things arising in the mind, but right view—in terms of the principle of kamma—reminds you that the unskillful ones will lead to bad results, and the skillful ones to good results. So you can't just sit there totally passive as you watch them arise and pass away, because that doesn't lead to concentration. You've got to foster the good qualities and abandon the unskillful ones.

In the next step of the path, the Buddha surrounds right effort with right mindfulness—"surrounding" it in the sense that you add two additional qualities to right effort. As the text says, you bring three qualities to bear on your contemplation: You want to be ardent, alert, and mindful. The ardency there is right effort. The mindfulness means that you keep your frame of reference in mind—as when we're keeping the breath in mind right now. The alertness means seeing what's happening in the present moment, seeing if you really are with the breath, if the mind is settling down well with the breath, and catching it when you've forgotten. You're trying to establish a frame of reference here because these four frames of reference—the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, the mind in and of itself, and mental qualities in and of themselves—are the themes or topics of right concentration. Mindfulness practice and concentration practice go hand in hand on the Buddha's path. Then, as you're trying to get the mind to settle down with its frame of reference, you have to start evaluating it to see what works and what doesn't work. As your frame of reference gets more and more solid, you actually move into the factors of jhana.

So that's what you should do to get into jhana—if you want it. Again, the Buddha doesn't say you have to do it, but if you want it, this is what you should do.

Jhana on its own doesn't lead to the end of suffering. There are a lot of passages describing people who attain different levels of jhana and are able to maintain them, but if they don't go beyond that, they end up getting reborn in the various Brahma worlds after they die. Then when they fall from there, who knows where they're going to land? One sutta shows people falling from the Brahma worlds and doing really stupid things. They've been so blissed out for so

long that they've forgotten that their actions can carry consequences, so they act in wanton and careless ways.

This is why, once the mind is firmly in jhana, you've got to start applying right view again. Only this time it's right view in terms of the four noble truths: looking for the stress in your activities and seeing where it's coming from in your mind. In other words, you look at mental events and mental states simply in terms of cause and effect, what's skillful and what's unskillful. Those are the basic categories underlying the four noble truths.

So as we're meditating here, remind yourself that the concentration is what we're after, what we're focusing on doing right here. Everything else on the path is aimed either at getting us here or else at making sure that once we *are* here we make the best use of the opportunity really to see things as they happen. In particular, we want to see this issue of how the mind is creating all this unnecessary stress all the time and what can be done to stop it. Of course, if you only want to follow part of the path, that's up to you. Remember, the Buddha never forced us to do anything. But if you want the best results, this is what you've got to do.