

## *What Is Skillful?*

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Wisdom, the Buddha says, begins with a series of questions: What is skillful? What is unskillful? What is blameworthy? What is blameless? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness, and what, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and pain?

Doing meditation is one of the answers to that question. It's one of the reasons why we're here, because meditation is skillful, blameless, and leads to long-term welfare and happiness. But as you're doing it, you're going to run into parts of the mind that are not interested in long-term welfare and happiness. They're interested in a little bit of pleasure right now. In fact, you find this all along the path.

The very beginning answers to those questions start with what the Buddha calls the ten guidelines: abstaining from killing, abstaining from stealing, abstaining from illicit sex, abstaining from lies, divisive speech, harsh speech, idle chatter; trying to get rid of inordinate greed, ill-will, and wrong views. You notice there's a lot of abstaining and getting-rid-of there. And there will be parts of the mind that don't want to abstain and don't want to get rid. They don't like rules. But it's not simply that we're following rules here. As we follow the rules, we begin to see things in the mind that we might not have seen otherwise. For instance, if you don't take the precept against lying, you don't really notice how many times you exaggerate the truth, or avoid the truth, or embellish the truth, saying things that are not quite true. But when you make up your mind what you are going to say is true, that you're to give a true representation of what you believe is happening—what you saw, what you heard—then you begin to notice whatever impulses you have to misrepresent the truth, even a little bit.

So in doing these skillful actions, you're not just creating good karma. You're also discovering things about the mind. And it's the same as you're focusing on the breath: There will be a lot of wandering around in the mind that you wouldn't have noticed if you hadn't made up your mind you were going to stay right here. Otherwise, you float seamlessly from one thought into another into another. If, on a normal day, you were to draw a map of where your thoughts had been for the previous five minutes, you'd see what a tangle they are. But you don't notice it until you've made up your mind that you're going to stay in one place.

It's important to notice these things because the roots of unskillful behavior are not in things outside. If we do something unskillful, we—or a lot of people—

will say, “Well, I did that because someone else did this.” But the Buddha said no, it comes from your own greed, aversion, and delusion. And that’s what we want to see, so we need to dig up those roots.

To do that, first we counteract them. For instance, we counteract greed with being generous. We counteract ill will with goodwill. Counteracting these things doesn’t dig them up, but in counteracting them you bring it out into the open, and then you’ve got to see, what’s their allure? When these things arise, why do you go for them? When they pass away, why do you try to dig them up again? What is it you like about greed? What is it you like about anger? What is it you like about your delusion? You see these things in other people and you can see how ugly they are, but for some reason you think they’re not as ugly in you: As far as you can see, your mind states are not defiled, your mind states are not ugly like that. When they actually get in the way of something you’re trying to do, that’s when you begin to realize they really are a problem. And once you admit that they’re there, then it’s a lot easier to see what their drawbacks are, and then you can compare the drawbacks with the allure.

This requires a lot of honesty. We find it so easy to deny that we’ve done something wrong. If other people are harmed by our actions, either they don’t matter, or no harm was done, or the harm wasn’t because of us. So you have to be honest about the drawbacks, just as you obviously have to be honest about the allure. Which part of your mind really likes being greedy? Which part of your mind really likes revenge? Which part of your mind really likes all these unskillful things that come from aversion and greed?

Delusion is harder to deal with, because by definition when you’re deluded you don’t know you’re deluded. But the best test for that is, if you come up with a course of action, the possibility of doing A or B, then if A looks okay then you go ahead and do it, but you’ve got to watch. What is okay about A? First, you have to look at your intention. Do you expect any harm to come from this? If so, you don’t do it. If it’s passed that test, the next test is, while you’re doing it, do you see any harm coming up? If you do, you stop. If it passes that test, you continue with the action until it’s done, and then you look at the long-term results. If you see are drawbacks to what you did, then you make up your mind, “Okay I’m not going to do that again.”

And you learned a lesson. Something that looked okay was not. You’ve chipped away a little bit at your delusion. Because these are the areas where delusion is most important: where we’re deluded about our intentions and about the results of our actions. It’s all too easy reading the texts to see that delusion is a matter of not seeing the four noble truths and it gets even bigger with delusion

about dependent co-arising, which makes it all very abstract. But you have to realize, when the Buddha is talking about the four noble truths and dependent co-arising, what is he talking about? He's talking about your intentions: how they give rise to actions and how those actions give rise to results, and how those results give rise to pain.

So right here is where you're going to look to see those things, and the Buddha's more technical analyses simply describes what you're doing in very, very precise terms. It's helpful to see what made you give rise to an intention. You dig down into the causes of dependent co-arising and you find the Buddha talks about fabrication, he talks about perceptions and feelings. He talks about the way you talk to yourself. He talks even about the way you breathe. So you dig down into your intentions and you come back to right where we are, right here, right now: the way you're breathing.

You study your mind as it moves away from the breath, and you learn, okay, that's how an intention forms. If it all happens in ignorance, it's going to lead to suffering of one kind or another. If you do it with knowledge, then it becomes part of the path.

So here we are with the breath, right next to the place where intentions get launched. And we have some control over how we breathe, and we have some control over how we pay attention to the breath. We try to develop our skills so that we can expand that amount of control, and in doing so we gain a lot of insight. The insight then helps us let go of the greed, aversion, and delusion, so that our actions will lead to long-term welfare and happiness. They'll be skillful; they'll be blameless.

So, what we're doing is that we're breathing right here, paying attention to the breath, being alert, keeping the breath in mind, trying to breath in a way that's skillful. It gives rise to a sense of ease that we can spread around the body. But it's not just for our comfort right here and now. The comfort is part of the reward of concentration, but the other reward is that you're getting to see very clearly the mechanics of the mind. They can lead either to long-term harm and suffering or to long-term welfare and happiness, a happiness that harms nobody.

We rest to gain some strength, but then once you've got that strength you don't just sit there. You put it to work. And it's also not the case that the insight is going to come only after you come out of concentration. While you're doing the concentration, as I said, you run up against a lot of things in the mind you wouldn't have noticed otherwise. So be alert to what's going on. And as the Buddha recommends that you stay with the breath, he's putting you in the right place so that you can start giving wise answers to those questions yourself.