

## *In Search of What's Skillful*

*October 12, 2009*

When the Buddha tells about his own search for awakening, as he goes from episode to episode, there's a phrase he keeps repeating: He went in search of what is skillful. When he left home, he went out in search of what is skillful. When he went to study with the different teachers, he was in search of what is skillful. When the two teachers didn't satisfy him, he went off in search of what is skillful, going to the banks of the Nerañjara River to practice his austerities.

This shows that all along his path he was convinced that skillful action was what was going to lead to awakening. He never seems to have abandoned that approach, even though there were people at the time who said there's nothing you can do to gain awakening. It just happens on its own—or it doesn't happen at all. But neither of those is an approach that you can test, that you can experiment with. The assumption that it's through your actions that you're going to achieve awakening: You have to have that assumption if you're going to try different approaches to see which approach works best. It's in this way that the search for the path to awakening is a search for what is skillful, what kind of action is skillful.

This is why his instructions to Rahula, when Rahula was seven, are teachings you can take as a basic approach for how to practice, how to meditate. Notice your intention, notice what you're doing and the results of what you're doing—the results that appear right now and the results that appear over time—and try to act on the intention to be skillful: in other words, not to harm yourself, not to harm others. Then you learn from your actions what works and what doesn't work. That was the approach the Buddha took in his own practice, all the way up through the end.

That's where it gets especially interesting, when he finally gets his mind into right concentration after realizing that jhana is the path. This is the first factor or the first fold of the noble eightfold path that he came across. He had the intuition that right concentration was part of the path, and then he got his mind into right concentration. That's when he started having various knowledges arising. The first was knowledge of his previous lives. The second was knowledge of how beings all over the universe die and then are reborn in line with their karma.

In other parts of the Canon, he talks about how there are people who, having had the first knowledge or that second knowledge, just set themselves up in business. They had seen that they had previous lifetimes, they became teachers just

on the basis of that, saying that they had seen the truth that we either do have previous lifetimes or we don't.

There were also cases where some people, recollecting previous lifetimes, would run slam against a life where they couldn't remember anything. There's a state of mind called non-perception, or perceptionless, where you have no perception of anything at all. If your memory of your previous lifetimes goes back and hits that wall, you come back with the conclusion that there was a beginning point in time and then from that point in time we've had many lifetimes.

But the Buddha didn't slip from gaining that knowledge to thinking he had enough to set himself up in business. His question basically was, what's the most skillful thing to do with this knowledge? First where did this knowledge come from? It came from his concentrated mind—that was good to notice. And second, what was the best thing to do with this knowledge? In the case of knowledge of his previous lifetimes, the next question was, "Does this apply to him only, or does it apply to other beings? And is there any pattern to how the lifetimes go up and down?"

That's what led to his second knowledge. And again, there were people who gained that kind of knowledge and then set themselves up in business as teachers. But the Buddha wasn't satisfied there. The next question was, what's the skillful thing to do with this knowledge?

He realized that the important insight was insight into action, insight into karma, that karma was based on intentions, and intentions in turn were based on views. The quality of the intentions on which they acted was what led to good rebirths, mixed rebirths, or bad rebirths. The next question that came to his mind was: "What kind of views would take you away from having to be reborn? Is there a kind of view, is there a kind of action that leads to the end of views and the end of actions?"

That's how he started looking into the four noble truths, which are a skillful application of the principle of karma. What are you doing right now that's causing suffering? And what can you do to put an end to suffering? He gained insight into the four noble truths, and then he also gained a similar kind of insight into what's called the *asavas*, the mental fermentations: the defilements that bubble up into the mind. There's sensuality, there are views, and then there's ignorance. When he abandoned that ignorance, he was able to let go of his views and attain full awakening.

So in each case, no matter how amazing the knowledge was, he never stopped there. He kept asking: What's the most skillful thing to do here? At the same time, he was very clear about what he had done to get there.

So this is something we should keep in mind all the way through our own practice, beginning with the practice of generosity, the practice of virtue, and on through meditation. You want to be very clear about what you're doing, why you're doing it, what you anticipate, and then the results you actually get. As you get results, you have to learn how to evaluate them. Are these good results? Are these bad results? If there's something that's bad, try to figure out what went wrong. "Was it the intention? Was it the implementation of the intention? Was there any greed, anger, or delusion in the mind that I didn't see?"

When we start getting knowledge in this way, the next question is, "What do you do with the knowledge?" The answer should always be, "Let's keep looking back at the mind again to see if we can get the mind into a state where it's more and more still, more and more clear, to see if we can detect any place where there's still stress, where there's still a burden on the mind that we're creating."

It's good that we get used to applying this principle from the very beginning of our practice—and not to forget to apply it as we get to the more refined states the concentration can give rise to. Because there is that tendency. You hit the infinitude of space and say, "Here we are." Some people call that the unconditioned—like the space in this room. You get a spacey feeling in the mind and say, "This must be it. This is unconditioned. We've arrived." But the question always should be: Is there anything you're doing to maintain that? What are you doing as you stay in that state?

The Buddha says that if you really look carefully, you see that there's a perception that holds you there. And the perception is something you keep repeatedly doing. It's an activity. So this can't be the unconditioned. If you see any wavering in that perception, then you can let it go. That gets replaced by the perception of just awareness, knowing, knowing, knowing. Again, it's very easy to think that you've hit some sort of metaphysical absolute here. And there are people who believe that they've reached a state of awareness where the awareness is all-embracing, and that whatever arises and passes away in it doesn't touch the purity of that awareness.

If they think that's the unconditioned, that can lead them to all kinds of weird ideas—for instance, that no matter what you do now, it's not going to have any effect. It's not going to touch that purity of your awareness. This is where we get people who feel they can break the precepts because they think their awareness is pure. But they forget to check to see: Are you doing something to maintain this state?

There's one sutta where the Buddha talks about going through various levels of meditation, and in each case you settle into that level of awareness, indulge in it,

learn to enjoy it, and then you start asking that question: Where is the disturbance here? You look around and usually find the disturbance is based on the perception that's holding you there. It's an activity you're doing.

The next question is: Can you stop that activity, just drop it and see what happens? This is the principle that can take you all the way to awakening. Because after you've learned very carefully to watch for your actions and to watch for your results, and you keep the framework of that questioning in mind, you finally get to something that is not maintained through any fabrication, through any intention at all. And you know that because you've detected even the subtlest kinds of intentions that can come with these very refined levels of concentration.

So whatever comes up in your meditation, these are the questions you ask. Always keep thinking of it in terms of karma. What did you do to get there? What insight did you gain into the process of action as you got there, and now that you've got this knowledge, what's the most skillful thing to do with it? Simply trying to label it: "What was that? Was that a metaphysical absolute? Was that awakening? What was that?"—That's not the most skillful thing you do with it. The most skillful thing is to look to see, "What did I learn about action? What skill did I develop? And now that I've gained some results from that skill, what's the best thing to do with that knowledge, the best things to do with those results?" You keep testing things, testing things, over and over like this, until you finally find something that holds up to the test.

What this means is that you have to learn how to develop your powers of observation so that you can trust your test of things, because nobody can step into your mind and say, "Yep, that's it. That's awakening," or whatever: "That's this level of jhana, that's that level of insight." And when you come right down to it, those labels don't really mean anything. What's really meaningful is when you see that there is a state where there's no more stress and you know for sure because you've tested it again and again and again.

I mentioned this morning the story that Ajaan Maha Boowa tells of where he'd been meditating for a long time, contemplating the unattractiveness of the body, until the thought struck him that for a long time he hadn't had any thoughts of lust, any feelings of lust. So the question arose: Had he gone beyond lust? So he decided to test it. He thought of a beautiful body, thought of that beautiful body right next to him, anything he could think of that would normally have provoked his lust in the past. He stuck with it and stuck with it for four days. Then finally on the fourth day, there was this little movement in the mind of being attracted to that image of the body. That's when he knew that lust was still not gone. Now, most people wouldn't have waited until the fourth day. After a

couple hours of testing, they'd say, "That's it. I've passed the test." That's all they would have gotten: some misunderstanding, because they hadn't really been ardent enough in testing things.

So whatever comes up, you've got to keep testing it in this way. And particularly when there's an experience that seems to open up the mind. Because we're not here just for peak experiences. We're here to understand: What do these experiences teach us about the principle of action? What did you do, what insight allowed you to gain that state? What did you do to drop? If you can't see that, then the peak experience hasn't taught you anything. You've got to have an understanding of karma that opens up certain things in the mind that hadn't been opened up before: things you just saw as just being there without realizing they were actually actions and intentions that you were doing. If you can't see through your intentions and watch them in action, then you haven't really learned anything.

So remember, it's all about karma. This is why the Buddha teaches about karma as his most basic principle and it follows all the way through. He never drops it. In fact, it's the consistency with which he keeps applying this teaching that's so distinctive about his own practice and the way he teaches us to practice. Whatever comes up: What did you do? What's the most skillful thing you can do with it? Those are the questions that lead to progress. Those are the questions that help you to test things until you find something that stands up to the test and that you can really trust.