

“My Way”

May 6, 2014

You probably know that song “I did it my way.” Basically, it’s saying that what I did may have been dumb, but I did it my way, and I’m proud that I did it my way. That’s doubly dumb, because as human beings, we can watch our actions.

When the Buddha talks about the mind being luminous, he’s not saying that it’s necessarily good, just that you have this quality of being able to see things, observe things going on inside. In particular, the Buddha asks you to focus that power of observation on your actions—your thoughts, your words, and your deeds—to see where they’re coming from and what they lead to. If they don’t lead to something good, then you can change.

The Buddha himself said he got on the right track when he learned how to divide his thoughts into two types: thoughts of sensuality, of ill will, and cruelty on the one side, and then thoughts of renunciation, lack of ill will, and lack of cruelty on the other.

In other words, he looked at his thoughts not in terms of, “Well, these are my thoughts; I’ve just got to stick with them,” or getting tied up in the content of the thoughts. He was looking at the quality that motivated them, realizing that the thoughts on the first side led to harm both for himself and others, while the thoughts on the other side didn’t lead to any harm at all, aside from the fact that thinking a lot can get you tired. But beyond that, they don’t do any harm.

Then he would hold the first type of thoughts in check whenever he noticed that “Okay, this thought is motivated by something unskillful.” He wanted to make sure that he didn’t follow through with it. He said it was like being a cowherd. During the season when rice was growing, you had to be very careful that your cows didn’t get into the rice fields and eat up the rice, because then there’d be problems with the owners of the fields. So you’d have to beat and check and do everything you could to keep the cows out of the fields.

As for other thoughts, the ones that were skillful, the Buddha said it was like being a cowherd during the dry season. The rice had been gathered, there was no danger in the rice fields, so the cows could wander pretty much where they wanted. All you had to do was be aware of the fact there were cows out there. You were going to have to bring them home at some point.

In other words, when you see a thought coming up in the mind, you don’t immediately grab on to it as *your* thought. Ajaan Lee has that nice talk where he talks about how germs going through your bloodstream may be thinking, too.

They go through your brain, and then suddenly you pick up their thoughts. Or there may be spirits who have some old issues with you, and they slip some unskillful thoughts into your brain.

The whole point of that is basically that wherever the thought comes from, the fact that it's your way of thinking or somebody else's way of thinking is not the issue. The issue is what type thinking this is and what should be done with it. Just because a thought comes into your mind doesn't mean you have to go with it. You can say no, especially if you see that it's going somewhere you don't want to go.

Then, of course, you have to check on where you want to go. What kind of thinking is that, that tells you where you want to go? Some of your ideas and goals in life have been misconstrued, so it's good to stop and think, to reflect on this type of thinking: Where is it going to lead me? The Buddha gives you a standard. There is a possibility for true happiness, a happiness that harms no one in terms of your actions, your words, and your thoughts. That is a possibility. And then you look at where your thoughts are going, where your words and deeds are going. How do they measure up?

In other words, he holds you to a high standard. Like those school teachers that none of us like when we have them, but we're really glad we had them after we've studied with them—the ones who hold you to a high standard and make you work harder than you would ordinarily work: That's the kind of teacher the Buddha was. That's the kind of teaching the Dhamma is.

One of the reasons we meditate is because meditation is a good place to rest the mind so that you can look at your thoughts with a little bit more equanimity, a little bit less sense of "Well, just because I thought this thought, I've got to act on it," or "I've got to speak it."

Ajaan Suwat used to have a lot of disdain for people who would just say anything that came into their heads without filtering it first. You've got to stop and ask yourself, "Where is this word going to lead? Where is this action going to lead?" And it goes deeper inside: "Where is this thought going to lead?" Even though no one else may see the thought, you're going to be reaping the results. What kind of results do you want?

This process requires two qualities of mind that the Buddha said were what he looked for in a student. One was that the student be honest about what he or she was doing, had done, was saying, had said, was thinking, had thought; and two, that the student be observant—in other words, seeing where his or her actions led. That power of observation is very important. We get the mind still so that it can observe very clearly where our thoughts are coming from, where whatever stress

they're causing is optional. In other words, we have the choice to act in other ways. We have to be willing to learn; we're here to change our ways.

So instead of doing it “my way,” you're doing it the Buddha's way. He's a good example, a person who's found true happiness and can show others the way to reach that happiness. We bow down to the Buddha every night, but the real bowing down, he said, is when you practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma—in other words, not in line with your own preconceived notions or in line with your old habits. You want to learn how to change your habits so they fit in with the Buddha's way of thinking, speaking, and acting.

And he recommends these habits as the only way to the goal, not because he's close-minded. You hear this a lot nowadays: “There are lots of different ways of getting to the top of the mountain.” But that's said by people who've never been to the top of the mountain. They look at the mountain from afar. It looks like all the sides of the mountain go up to the top. But when you actually get up there, you find that certain paths don't make it. They end in huge chasms, or they're way too dangerous. It's the people who've been to the top: They're the ones who know which path leads up to the top. In the Buddha's case, he said, “This is it: the noble eightfold path. That's the only path up.”

So it's not because he was narrow-minded or inexperienced. Actually, he was very experienced. He saw that this is the way things work. If you really want to be happy—and that was his compassion for us—if you really want to be happy, this is how you do it. So you've got to reflect on your actions. You've got to reflect on your thoughts, words, and deeds, on how they have an impact on you and how they have an impact on others. Keep your attention focused there more than outside.

Our media nowadays tend to focus on everything outside. We almost live in the screens of our hand-held devices or our computers or whatever. And the important people seem to be the ones who are in the screens. But they're not. The important person is the person holding the screen. What is this person doing? What is this person saying? What is this person thinking? That's something you can actually have an impact on. And the impact is not felt only by you; it's felt by all the people around you. So you have to be very, very careful.

This is what the principle of heedfulness is all about. Your actions do have consequences. So instead of having the energy run out your eyes and ears or whatever, try to keep the energy focused inside so that you can act and speak and think in really careful, well-considered ways.

So you put “my way” aside and you focus on *the* way to do things as skillfully as you can.