

## *The Carpenter's Adze*

*October 26, 2020*

There's a passage where the Buddha compares the practice to a carpenter using an adze. It's a tool, somewhat like an axe, except that the blade is perpendicular to the handle rather than parallel. It was used for carving wood. As the Buddha said, the carpenter uses the adze every day and he knows that by using it, he wears down the handle. But he can't measure from day to day how far down the handle's been worn down. But he does know that someday it'll be worn through.

Recently I heard someone interpret that as meaning that we shouldn't try to evaluate our practice, that we should trust in the practice, and just keep doing it and doing it, because evaluating will get you all tied up in knots. But that goes against so much in the Canon where the Buddha talks about how it's important to evaluate how well your actions are going, to reflect on what you're doing, and to make adjustments. This point starts with the passage with Rahula where the Buddha says, "Look at your actions in the same way that you'd look in a mirror." First you look at your intentions. If there's anything unskillful in the intention, you don't act on it. If the intention looks harmless, then you can act on it. Then you look at the results of your actions, while you're doing the action and afterwards. If you realize that you made a mistake and actually did harm somebody, you go and talk it over with someone else more advanced in the practice. Then you resolve not to repeat that mistake.

As you go through the day—the Buddha gives the example of going on alms, which is the time when monks are most exposed to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations that they wouldn't get in the monastery—you have to reflect afterwards: Were there any places—either on the way to the village or in the village or on the way back—where the mind was taken with desire, lust, anger, irritation, or delusion around any sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations? If there were any of these unskillful qualities, you should work to get rid of them.

Even when you meditate, you have to reflect when the mind's getting into concentration: "Where are there still disturbances? What am I doing to cause the disturbances? How do I drop those causes?" In other words, there's constant reflection.

So what about that carpenter with his adze? Well, the Buddha actually didn't say that it was for the practice as a whole that you don't reflect or evaluate. He was more specific. Just as the carpenter knows that the handle's going to be worn down but can't measure how much it's been worn down one day, in the same you

can't measure how many of your fetters have been worn down. You can't measure how many of your effluents have been stopped. In other words, you can't gauge how close you are to awakening. Are you three inches closer today than you were yesterday? Two or three defilements closer? That kind of thing you can't measure. So in that sense it does require a certain amount of faith that the path will lead to that goal. You keep at it.

But the steps on the path are things you *do* have to evaluate. In other words, if you're going on a long voyage, you may not know how many miles exactly you've got left in the voyage, but you *do* want to make sure that you do each step properly. As you focus on the steps, they'll lead you there. Focus on doing them well. After all, that's how the Buddha himself gained awakening. He tried different paths. He looked carefully at what he was doing, and he gave each path a fair amount of time. Then he stopped to reflect: "This path that I'm following, is it going to take me all the way there?" When he realized it wasn't, he had to make changes. And what changes did he make? He made changes in his actions. So he reflected on what he had been doing and on what he could change.

As he said, he was looking for what was skillful, and this is how skills are developed. You focus on the particulars of the skill, and the larger picture will begin to become clear.

You can see this in his instructions on breath meditation.

There was that one time when he was telling the monks to be mindful of the breath, and one monk spoke up and said, "Oh, I already do that." The Buddha said, "Well, what kind of breath mindfulness do you practice?" And the monk said, "I put aside all thoughts of the past, all hankering after the future, and calming my mind in the present moment, I breathe in and breathe out." In other words, stifle thought and just breathe in and breathe out. The Buddha said, "Okay, there is that kind of breath mindfulness. I don't deny it, but it's not the kind that gives great fruit." Then he listed all the sixteen steps.

What's distinctive about the sixteen steps is how much they talk about fabrication, starting with the breath. The Buddha could have said many times, "Calm the breath." But no, he says to calm bodily fabrication. He could have said to calm your perceptions and feelings. But no, he said to calm mental fabrication. In both cases, he's focusing on the fact that you are fabricating the state of your body, and you're fabricating the state of your mind, and he wants *you* to see it in those terms, and to reflect on what you're fabricating.

He said to breathe in a way where you're sensitive to rapture, sensitive to pleasure. How do you do that? You have to calm bodily fabrication. You want to steady the mind—make it more concentrated—or gladden the mind. How do you

do that? You deal with mental fabrication. You look at your perceptions, you look at your feelings, and ask yourself, “Which ones can I change so that the mind does become more and more steady, more and more concentrated?”

So the practice is one of constant evaluation. But you learn how to focus your evaluation on your actions and their immediate results. You can’t ask yourself, “Am I closer to awakening today than I was yesterday?” That’s nothing you can measure. But you can ask yourself, “Is my mind clearer today than it was yesterday? When I focus on the breath in this way, is it better than when I focus on it that way?”—immediate things you can focus on, immediate things you can adjust, immediate things you can learn from.

After all, evaluation is part of concentration. You have to evaluate: Is the mind settling down properly? If not, what are you going to do? The Buddha’s image is of a cook. The cook creates lots of different kinds of food and then notices: What kind of food does his master reach for? What kind of food does his master praise? Okay, make more of that. If there’s something the master doesn’t like, you can make less. In the same way, what does your mind go for? Does it like working with the breath? What kind of breath does it like? What breath exercises, what breath games can you play to get the mind engaged?

When it gets tired of the breath, there are other topics you can focus on. You can focus on contemplating the parts of the body. You can reflect on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, on your own generosity or your own virtue when you’re feeling down. Reflect on death when you’re feeling lazy. Learn how to read your mind by watching what it does, how it reacts to different types of training. After all, the carpenter himself has to do that. He’s not focusing on how much the handle’s wearing down, but he is focusing on how well he’s using his adze while making whatever piece of furniture he’s making. When he uses his adze, he tries to use it as skillfully as he can, reflecting on what he’s done, looking at the results, trying to figure out what went wrong if something went wrong, and how he might correct it. As he’s focused on his skill, the handle wears down.

The difference, of course, is that focusing on the breath is not just make-work—in other words, something to give yourself something to keep busy as you’re working on awakening, because you’re not just doing just any old thing. You’re focusing on the processes of fabrication. You’re learning about fabrication so that you can get beyond it.

I had a Zen student complain to me one time, “This Theravada emphasis on looking at your actions and judging them as to whether they’re skillful or not,” he said, “why focus on the minutiae when emptiness, the unconditioned is all around you?” Actually, the path doesn’t get in the way of seeing the unconditioned. In

fact, the little steps in the path are what enable you to see what fabrication is and how it's done—and how the mind fabricates parts of its experience that you wouldn't have expected otherwise.

It's only when you're really sensitive to fabrication that you're going to find the unfabricated. This process of being very careful on how you step on each step of the path doesn't get in the way of the goal. It's what guarantees that you're going to get there.

So pay careful attention to what you're doing. Pay careful attention to what the mind needs right now. If it needs entertainment, how do you entertain it with the breath? If it needs soothing, how do you soothe it with the breath? When you pay careful attention like this, the mind does become more and more your friend, because you're listening to it carefully. It gets more and more willing to stick with the path so that you're not going on just faith alone.

You do have to have *some* faith. Your faith and conviction in the Buddha's path and the Buddha himself is not going to be fully confirmed until stream entry. But there are milestones along the way. There're skills to develop along the way. As you see the results of developing those skills, it gives you more and more encouragement: Yes, this is a likely path. And it's a good path to be on. It doesn't save all of its rewards for the end. You can see progress in certain areas as you're working on the path. And it's all to the good.