

To Keep You Going

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The Buddha's teachings don't start with a first principle. They start with a last principle: the Buddha's own experience of total freedom from suffering. Everything else works back from that. On the one hand, he reflected on what he had to do in order to get there. But he also had to reflect on how to make his teachings persuasive to people where they were. How could he get other people to attain the same total freedom? And one of his strategies was to work with a desire that we have—maybe not all of us, but most of us—which is the desire for pleasure and happiness, something that sometimes gets dismissed simply as being hedonistic, lazy, and of not much spiritual value. But he discovered that if you could take that desire and really take it seriously, it could lead you far.

So, do you really want to be happy? What's involved in really being happy? For one, you'd like a happiness that's reliable, a happiness that doesn't turn on you.

What does that happiness require? One, it has to be founded on something that's not going to turn on you. And two, the search for that happiness can't harm others, because if your happiness depends on their being harmed, they're not going to stand for it. Third, you have to trust in your own ability to do this. In other words, you have to believe in action, that your actions are real, that they really do have results, and that they're not totally determined. You can change your ways of acting. Otherwise, if they were totally determined from the past, you'd have no choices. And that would make you give up right there.

So that's the beginning of wisdom. Compassion, of course, comes from the realization that your happiness can't depend on the suffering of others. And then finally there's the quality of purity, in which you really do make sure that your actions don't cause any suffering or any harm. You have to reflect on your actions and their results, again and again and again. Learning to recognize your mistakes and figuring out how not to repeat them. This requires a lot of work, but it does develop good qualities of mind: wisdom, compassion, purity. These are honorable things. This is a pursuit of happiness that isn't just hedonistic. As you follow it, you're developing noble qualities of mind.

And of course, another quality that you need to develop is patience, because if your idea of happiness is the quickest pleasure possible, you're never going to get anywhere. You have to be able to work for long-term goals and develop the endurance that will see you through.

This point is emphasized in the Buddha's first summary of his teachings, after he had converted the followers of the Kassapa brothers, Sariputta, Moggallana, and all of their fellow students who came from another teacher. After they had become arahants, the Buddha gave a sermon called the Ovada Patimokkha. We don't have a record of the full sermon. All we have is a record of the verses that the Buddha used to summarize the main points, but the verses are enough to let us know that he started his sermon with the theme of patient endurance. The message is that to grow in the practice you have to learn how to be patient. You have to learn how to endure. You have to learn how to stick with things, because this is a path that's going to take time. You can't let yourself get diverted by every little pleasure that comes past. In fact, you can't let yourself get diverted by major pleasures coming past that are going to pull you off the path.

That requires a pragmatic kind of wisdom. How do you motivate yourself to stick with it? Especially when the results aren't coming immediately, how do you take pleasure in the fact that you're sticking with a path like this? There are various ways that the Buddha uses to motivate people.

Primary is the sense of craft. He often compares all the different skills needed on the path to the skills of archers and cooks, carpenters, musicians: people who learn to take pride in their craft and enjoy doing it well.

This means that we're concerned not only with the happiness that comes from having completed the work, but also with learning how to enjoy the work while you're doing it. So think of the meditation that you're doing right now as a kind of craft. That means developing a certain sort of resilience: not sitting and simply wishing, "May it work, may it

work,” whatever you’re doing, but telling yourself, “I’m going to try this, to see if it does work. And if it doesn’t work, I’ve learned, and I’ll try another approach.” Then be emotionally steady enough that you’re prepared for things not to work—or to work sometimes and not at other times.

One of the biggest mistakes you can make as a meditator is to find something that works for a little while but then doesn’t seem to work any more, and so you just throw it away as totally useless. Actually, what you found was something useful in certain circumstances, and you want to remember it in case those circumstances come up again.

There’s a concept that comes with craftsmanship, which may sound strange to us, in our modern romantic attitudes towards craft. It’s called the dignity of obedience. There are skills that you have to pick up from other people. You can’t insist immediately, “I want to do things my way, or I want to explore things my way.” First you have to learn the basic skills needed to really do a good exploration, so that you also learn how to be a good judge of what’s good craftsmanship and what’s not. To do this, you have to be willing to follow the example of the expert craftsperson and imitate it as faithfully as possible. That’s how you pick up these basic skills. That’s the dignity of obedience.

In the old days of the medieval guilds, there was a certain pride in learning how to do things just as the master had done—not necessarily that you’d do it that way forever, simply that if you learn how to pick up those skills, then you’re in a solid position to expand on them. But if you grope around without having developed those skills, how can you trust your own powers of judgment? At the same time, you’re missing a good opportunity. So there’s a certain dignity and pride that comes in listening to the Buddha’s teachings and really giving them a fair chance: learning how to adapt your ways of thinking and acting and speaking so that they fit in with the standards of the Buddha, instead of insisting that you want to change the Dhamma to suit your own ways.

Now, there are ways that the Dhamma can be expanded. The great ajaans, for instance, don’t just quote texts at you. They have their own idiosyncratic ways of explaining the Dhamma, but it comes from their having mastered the basic skills. That’s what gives it authenticity.

So that’s one of the ways you can motivate yourself: learning how to take pride in your craftsmanship.

The obverse of that, of course, is developing a sense of shame—a healthy sense of shame. When you think about doing things that you know are below the level of the craft, you should feel a sense of shame about it, that you’d be ashamed to do that. This doesn’t mean you say, “I’m a horrible person, I’m a miserable slob,” but simply that you’re above that kind of behavior. That’s actually a sign of genuine, well-based self-esteem.

One of the most destructive attitudes around nowadays is the idea that shame is bad for people, so we should try to make sure they don’t feel any sense of shame. Like the drug counselor I met up in Vancouver: He was part of a service offering free counseling to the drug addicts among the many homeless people there. He was doing his best to get the addicts to come in and see him. And he found the only way he could do that was to try to make the addicts feel good about themselves. But after several years of this, he was telling me, “You know, this is not getting them off the drugs. In fact, it’s encouraging them to stay with the addiction, thinking that being a drug addict was perfectly fine.” Sometimes a sense of shame is needed to make you a better person.

Together with a sense of shame is a sense of compunction. When you see a course of action that you know is going to harm somebody—yourself or others—you want to develop a twinge of conscience: “Wouldn’t you really feel bad about doing that?” That’s your moral sense speaking to you.

So shame and compunction are two other ways that you can motivate yourself and come to take joy in the fact that “I’m acting in a way that’s not harming anybody. I’m acting in a way that’s honorable.” There’s a pleasure in that. There’s a satisfaction in that: that even if you haven’t reached the end of the path, at least you’re behaving in an honorable

way. And this is a path that harms no one. It develops good qualities of mind, such as the sense of honor that goes with the craft and keeps shame from becoming debilitating.

The major motivator, though, is heedfulness, realizing that “If I don’t work on my mind, if I don’t develop these good qualities, there’s going to be suffering down the line, big time.” You can ask yourself: Do you really love yourself? Yes. Do you want to suffer? No. Make the voices that ask those questions and give the right answers the dominant factions of your mind, so that you don’t kill your sense of shame. You don’t kill your sense of compunction. You don’t kill your sense of heedfulness. You take them seriously.

The sense of heedfulness is the opposite of apathy, which says, “I don’t really care,” which is the way that some people think that having no preferences is. “Well, it doesn’t matter. I’m okay with whatever comes up.” Heedfulness says, “No. If I’ve got it within my power, then this is the most important thing I have to accept: that I can make a difference.” Are you going to abandon that ability? Are you going to pretend that you don’t have it? If you do, what are you going to think when you suffer down the line? You’ll look back on the choices you could have made but didn’t make because you were too lazy or too whatever to stick with them. That thought will bring a lot of regret or denial, neither of which is anything you want to develop.

So these are some of the ways in which the Buddha has you motivate yourself to develop patience, so that you actually do find a sense of joy, a sense of well-being, even at the points where the path seems pretty hopeless, where you seem pretty hopeless. You’re not getting the results you want, the defilements are yapping at your heels, whispering in your ears, saying, “Hey, come on. Give up.” You want to have other voices in your mind that say, “No, look. You really do want to take pride in your craftsmanship even though you haven’t finished the table. You know you’re working on a good table.” Instead of thinking how many more steps it’s going to take before the table is done, take each step, one at a time, and do it as skillfully as you can. Take joy in the skill, realizing that this is how you can keep your own best interests in mind.

You’re alert to the dangers out there. You’re alert to the dangers in your own mind. We’ve all got dangerous minds. But you realize that you’re on the path that takes you beyond them. Whether the results come quickly or slowly is not the issue. The issue is whether you stay on the path and you nurture all the voices in the mind that give you the energy to stay on the path. This is how you’re a true friend to yourself, in that you can ultimately taste the Buddha’s last principle, which is what gives the Dhamma all of its worth.

When the Buddha talked about the essence of the heartwood of the teachings, it’s the fact that release is true. And it’s absolute. There’s something of substantial and essential worth to it. Everything else the Buddha taught derives its worth from that fact. If you’re going to reach that essence, though, you have to make yourself a worthwhile and substantial person. And you want to develop the wisdom not only to see that what the Buddha is talking about is a good thing, but also to know how to talk yourself into actually sticking with the good path that will take you there.