

Long-term Consequences

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We meditate to train the mind because the mind has to learn how to depend on itself.

We depend on our parents when we're young. As we get older, we have to go our separate ways, and so we have to learn how to depend on ourselves. Our parents teach us to depend on ourselves in some ways, but we have to teach ourselves as well. Because that's where goodness comes from: It has to come from within. Some people receive the current of goodness from their parents but they don't carry it on, no matter how much the parents try. Other people can pick up on the current and carry it on, and they become part of that current of goodness that flows through the world.

So we keep on doing what's good inside, training the mind. Because that's what enables us to do good. When the mind isn't well-trained and we meet up with obstacles, we meet up with aging, illness, death, separation, a lot of people just give up. Whatever goodness they had, they lose. They just keep grasping at whatever to give some relief in the short term but they forget about the long term.

As the Buddha teaches us, you have to think about the long-term. What are going to be the results of your actions? It's good that we've had the opportunity to hear these teachings so that we can think in the long term, because there's a lot in our lives around us right now that has us think in the short term, "Get this right now! Get that right now! Push this button. Click right here." Instant gratification. And even then for many of us it's too slow. But the Buddha says you have to think about the long-term consequences.

This is what our parents taught us from the very beginning: Think about the long-term consequences of what you're doing. Before you act, think about what the results are going to be. While you're acting, look at what the results are. When the action is done, if you realize you've made a mistake, go talk it over with someone you trust. This is how you train yourself, not just to have good intentions but to have skillful intentions, intentions that really do lead to well-being in the world. It's a simple principle, but it's a principle we all too often forget.

So if we want goodness to stay in the world we have to turn around and look at our minds. Are we careful about the way we act? Are we careful about the way we speak? Are we careful about the way we think? If we are, okay, that means goodness is still alive in us and still has an opportunity to continue flowing through the world, flowing through us. If we're not careful, who knows what's going to happen.

So we do good and dedicate it to others. We think about the happiness we want in life, realizing that it has to be a happiness that doesn't cause any harm to other people. If our happiness causes harm to others, they're not going to be happy with that happiness, they're going to do what they can to prevent it.

So the qualities often attributed to the Buddha – his discernment, his compassion, his purity – all come down to this: learning how to look for happiness in a wise and careful way. We find that when we do that, it involves generosity, virtue, and meditation. These are the things that provide a happiness that doesn't harm anybody in any way at all. That's the kind of happiness that can last.

We learn this from others and then we carry it on so that we can be a good example to still more other people, and so that this current of goodness can continue flowing. The goodness we learn from our parents, the goodness we learn from our teachers, can flow through us into the people who come after us. That's what keeps this current alive.