

Unskillful Voices

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Developing a sense of ease in the meditation is important. Having your spot inside the body where you feel at ease, where the breath feels gratifying, feels good coming in, feels good going out, is an important ally in the practice. Because when you sit down and look at your mind, often you'll see things that you don't like. Sometimes they're memories of the past, things you did in the past that you wish you hadn't done, or things you didn't do that you wish you could have done. Sometimes they're urges in the present moment, things that you'd like to do but you don't feel right about doing. You see them there in the mind. If you're going to deal with them, you have to deal with them from a position of not feeling threatened by them, not feeling weighed down by them. For this reason, you need this spot where it just feels good to stay right here. So work on developing this.

The Buddha talks about concentration as a strength. And the images he uses to illustrate concentration usually revolve around food on the one hand and water on the other. Concentration is food and water for the mind. It's what gives you nourishment, refreshment, strength. Without this of food and water, the meditation gets very dry. Because when you start to be mindful of your feelings, mindful of your thoughts and emotions, as I said, you start seeing things that you don't like. Some of us try to put them out of mind, and in doing so we can create a little area of the mind where everything gets shoved away. And of course those things are going to eventually come back out. They can't stay there.

So to deal with them intelligently you've got to feel good right here. Then you can start looking at them and realizing that what you're responsible for right now is not what you've done in the past, but your choices you're making in the present moment.

Lots of ideas come up in the mind. It's like a committee discussing ideas: "How about doing this? Well, how about doing that?" You've heard about people with multiple personalities, the really extreme cases where they get schizoid and the multiple personalities refuse to recognize each other. That's unhealthy. For most of us, though, there is a dialogue in the mind, and it's healthy that there is. What's even healthier is when the skillful voices can win out. That's where you can make a positive difference in your life. So it's important that you understand what's going on in the mind and how you can deal with it.

The Buddha's teachings are primarily famous for two things. One is his emphasis on suffering and the end of suffering. And then there's the teaching on

kamma. Some people have trouble seeing the connection between the two, but for the Buddha they were very strongly connected. Remember the story of the night of his awakening. His first knowledge was remembering his past lives. The second knowledge was seeing that he wasn't the only person with past lives. Everybody in the world dies and is reborn again and again and again, and they're reborn in line with their actions, which are intentions. These actions are shaped by their views about what's skillful and what's unskillful, what their actions can do, what their actions can't do.

Then he used that insight into views and intentions to examine his own views and intentions in the present moment. And that was where he was able to analyze the problem of suffering as it was caused in the present moment. That was the third knowledge, when his knowledge of kamma was able to stop causing suffering and to bring him awakening, to take him to the deathless.

So the teaching he gave after his awakening revolves around these issues, these issues of what is the power of human action to cause suffering? What is the power of human action to put an end to suffering? And a large part of that power requires that you understand action and the results of your actions.

What it comes down to basically is this: As he said, the essence of his awakening was a principle of causality. That sounds abstract. But it's very relevant to what's going on in your mind right now. Your experience of the present moment is made up of three things: results of past intentions, your current intentions, and the results of your current intentions. Now, things that come from the past you have no control over. They're going to come, but you can control how you react to them and shape them in the present moment. And that's going to make a huge difference in how much you suffer, say, from bad past actions.

The first requirement is that you develop lots of goodwill both for yourself, for the people you may have harmed in the past, and then for all people, all beings. This helps to open up your mind, get you out of the cocoon of your own suffering. That was one of the important messages in that second knowledge the Buddha gained. His mind opened up to the sufferings of all beings to see that we're all in the same boat.

When you can maintain that larger perspective, you want to realize that what's unskillful in your mind is not peculiar to you. Everyone has been doing unskillful things off and on for a long time. This broadens your compassion. You learn to be compassionate to yourself; you learn to be compassionate for other beings. And that right there, the Buddha says, helps alleviate a lot of suffering, because the impact of past bad actions on your mind at that point is a lot less. So compassion

is an important part of the practice—not only in alleviating suffering from the past, but also in preventing yourself from creating new suffering now and on into the future.

Because you look at the way of the world, and what lasts? What lasts is the results of your actions. They register as pain and pleasure. And actions that create pain are a huge, needless burden, both for yourself and other people. You look around at the world, and you see so much needless suffering. It doesn't have to be that way, it doesn't serve any purpose at all, yet it happens again and again and again.

I remember watching my father die. He went through a long illness at the end of his life. It was debilitating not only physically but also mentally. Toward the end he started getting dementia. I kept reflecting: What purpose does this serve? It serves no purpose at all. But it's there, and there's so much of it in the world, so why would we want to create any more needless suffering? There's more than enough already.

So where do you start? You have to start right here, looking at your intentions, and learning to choose from whatever comes up in the mind, from whatever the committee has to recommend, what is the most skillful thing to do. When you start understanding things in this way, that you have the choice in the present moment whether to continue with whatever bad habits you've had in the past, this is where you really make a clean break with the past.

We have this potential for freedom in the present moment yet we don't take advantage of it. That's the big tragedy of human life. Sometimes we look at our past and we say we'd like to make a clean break. And where do you make it? You make it here, each moment you choose to do the most skillful thing you can think of, the thing that causes the least harm, the least suffering, that leads to the greatest benefit. Each time you make that choice you're exercising your freedom, and the more you exercise your freedom the greater it grows. And the Buddha says, when you exercise it fully, ultimately it leads to total freedom from suffering. There is that potential.

So the whole purpose of the path is to strengthen you so you can make the most of your potential.

Conviction in the principle of kamma: That's a strength because it emphasizes how important each decision is. Sometimes there will be a member of the committee that says, "Okay, you can make a skillful choice right now, but in another five minutes you're going to go back to the old ways, so why bother right now?" Don't listen to that voice. It's destructive. Just say to yourself: "Well, I don't care about five minutes from now. Right now I'm going to do the skillful

thing. When five minutes is up we can deal with what to do then. But right now I'm going to make the best choice because it's important." You could sit around and think about how the Sun is going to go nova sometime, and everything in the world is going to burn to a crisp, and that would make your actions and choices seem really minuscule. Well, don't think in those ways. It's your life that you're shaping, it's your experience of pleasure or pain, and the pleasure and pain of the people immediately around you, and you can make a difference right there. That's what the conviction in kamma teaches you: that you can make a difference. And that what you choose to do right now is really important.

And then you just stick with that conviction, that's persistence. That's another strength. You learn to be mindful in order to keep that view in mind, keep reminding yourself: Okay, do the skillful thing right now. If you've slipped in the past, don't worry about it. That's the past. Now you've got the present moment, you've got a chance for something new. That mindfulness is another strength. When you keep at this, you start finding the strength of concentration, where there's a sense of ease, a sense of well-being. Then one of the results of making skillful choices is that it also makes skillful choices easier to make. You're coming from a position of strength, you're coming from a position not of poverty, but of wealth. You've got this food and water for the mind. And ultimately that leads to the strength of discernment, when you begin to see through all of the motivations that would lead you to do unskillful things. You realize that you don't have to identify with them at all. That they don't need to have power over you.

So those are the strengths you need on the path. As you develop them, you don't only have to listen to the narrative of the Buddha's life, you can start making the narrative of awakening real in your life as well. The trick is to get all of you together on the same boat. In other words, put yourself in a position where you can look at all the different voices in your head and start sorting out: "Which ones do I want to start listening to, which ones do I not want to listen to?"

And you're doing it not out of fear, not out of repression, when you say: "No, I don't want to listen to this voice." You're not denying that it's there. You don't push it off into a corner where it turns into The Thing that sends its tentacles under the floorboards and up through the cracks to strangle you. You simply recognize, okay, there are unskillful intentions in the mind, but you don't have to follow them. Because you've got the freedom of choice.

That's what the Buddha's teachings on kamma are all about. That's what his teachings on suffering are all about. You put them altogether: We have the ability to create suffering for ourselves, but also have the ability to put an end to suffering

right here and now. So make the most of the Buddha's discoveries, and see what good things they lead you to discover in your own mind.