

## *Loving Yourself*

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Some of my favorite passages in the Canon are of King Pasenadi Kosala coming to see the Buddha. You get the impression that before he knew the Buddha he wasn't a very thoughtful person. He was a king, enjoyed the sorts of things that kings enjoy, especially when they're intoxicated with power. But he starts hanging around the Buddha and he starts having what you might call spiritual insights. They have a, "Hey! never thought of this before!" quality.

He comes to the Buddha one day and he says, "You know, people who say that they love themselves but then act on unskillful intentions, really don't love themselves. The ones who love themselves are the ones who act only on skillful intentions." It's a very basic insight, and it's one that we could all take to heart.

Because if you act on unskillful intentions, it leaves a scar on the mind. And no matter how much denial you may build up around it, it makes it harder and harder to just be with yourself, harder to be true to yourself, true *with* yourself, to admit what's actually going on in the mind.

There are two places where you can see this very clearly: one is when you meditate and the other is when you die. In the course of your life, you may be able to keep up your defenses, but as you approach death you get weakened and your defenses begin to fall down. You're face-to-face with a lot of the really unskillful stuff you did in the past. And at that point, where you're weakened, it's really hard to take.

This is why it's good to meditate well before that point, because you can start dealing with those unpleasant memories and sort things out. It's not going to be pleasant to deal with them but at least as a meditator you've got tools, you've got strengths to deal with them. Because what you're doing as you're meditating is setting up a specific intention, a skillful intention right here: to stay with the breath, to be alert, to be mindful, to put an effort into pursuing the path. You're going to run up against a lot of other intentions that go crosswise to the path or pull you back in the other direction, so you've got to learn how to deal with them. If you deny that they're there, you can't really deal with them effectively. So you've got to learn how to be honest with yourself that, yes, you do have unskillful intentions sloshing around in the mind.

When I first started meditating with Ajaan Fuang, I must admit I was jealous of his other students who were able to read other people's minds. I thought that of all the psychic powers out there, that would be the coolest one to have. But one of them mentioned to me one day, she said, "It's not all that good to see what's going on in other people's minds. It's just a lot of garbage. And a lot of contrary intentions, one intention pulls one way, another intention pulls the other way and you really don't know what's going on in that person's mind. And often that person doesn't know what's going on in his or her mind, either." It's like knowing what other people have stashed in their closets: a lot of junk and random, contrary things.

So one of the things we're trying to learn as we meditate is how to straighten our own minds out, to at least be clear about our intentions and get out of the murk of unclear intentions. One of the reasons our intentions are unclear is that some of them we know are unskillful. We've acted on unskillful intentions in the past and they're still lurking around in the present moment, where they can easily slip into any decision that we make. Yet we don't like to think about that, so we put up walls in the mind to deny that—which is why it's all murky.

So the Buddha encourages you to have a positive attitude toward what you're doing right now. He talks about the case where someone's been listening to a Jain teacher who says, "All those who've done unskillful things are going to go to hell. Period." He says that if you believe that, it's like putting yourself in hell right now. He says the proper attitude is to listen to the Buddha who says, "Okay, this kind of behavior is unskillful. Try to refrain from it." He tells you to reflect, "Yes, I have acted on those unskillful intentions in the past. That was unskillful, that was not good. But if I sit around indulging in remorse right now, that's not going to undo what I did or help things in the present moment. So from now on, I'll make up my mind to refrain from that. Whenever that unskillful intention comes up, I'll say No to it."

And then to strengthen that intention, you develop thoughts of goodwill: for yourself, for everyone around you. Unlimited goodwill. Because if you really have your own true happiness in mind, you're not going to act on anything unskillful. If you have the happiness of others in mind, you're not going to act on anything unskillful. Then take joy in the fact that you've got this new intention that's going to change things. It's not going to change things automatically overnight, but at least you're taking a stance on something skillful. Hold onto that. And try to notice any intention that comes up that goes against that attitude of unlimited goodwill.

Another way of enforcing this change in attitude is to really be strict with yourself about the precepts, because the precepts force you to be clear about your intentions. Whether you're taking the five or the eight or the 227 precepts, you set them up as walls and say you're not going to go beyond them, period. And then you'll start noticing all the mind's subterfuges and clever ways of saying, "Well, no, that's a silly rule. You're being legalistic." In Vajrayana they even say, "Look, someone who holds strictly to the precepts develops pride. We've got to learn how to let go of pride, so let's let go of pride by breaking the precepts." That's a really clever subterfuge but it's very unskillful. The pride of holding to the precepts is much better than the pride of being able to work your way around them.

The meditation also forces you to be clear about your intentions. Anything that deviates from your original intention to stay with the breath, you've got to be clear about it. Otherwise, you're going to be spending your whole meditation period wandering around looking at the sights, smelling the flowers, and not really doing the work that needs to be done.

So all the training is aimed at getting you to be really honest with yourself about what your intentions are and to admit that there are unskillful intentions in the mind—not to get depressed about that fact, but simply to see them as challenges to be overcome.

We all have unskillful intentions. As Ajaan Lee once said, “To study is to know the texts, but to practice is to know your own defilements.” So you’re going to have to face up to your defilements. You’ve got greed, you’ve got anger and delusion. Don’t let that depress you. Just realize, okay, there’s work to be done, and you’ve got the tools to do it. At the same time, you’ve got these different aspects of the practice—the precepts, goodwill, the meditation—as walls to run up against when you find yourself entertaining an unskillful intention. But they also to channel you in the right direction, to remind you of what your own true best interest is. The trick is not to let yourself get depressed or down about your unskillful intentions—whether past or present—but to focus instead on the fact that you do have skillful intentions in here, too. And the more you follow those skillful intentions, the stronger they’re going to get.

They may seem artificial sometimes. You might find yourself saying, “That’s not the real me. The real me is probably really unskillful.” Well, remember what the Buddha said about the “real you”: It’s a creation. You’re free to create it, and if you’re creating a new type of you, well, that’s fine. You’re heading in the right direction.

But all this depends on your ability to be able to see your unskillful intentions, to admit that they’re there. Then, when you admit that they’re there, you can work with them.

That way, in King Pasenadi’s insight, that shows that you really do love yourself.

And it reinforces the Buddha’s own primary request for a student. He said, “Bring me an observant person who tells the truth and is no deceiver, and I’ll teach that person the Dhamma.” That’s the basic requirement to practice. And being no deceiver means not only that don’t you deceive other people but also that you don’t deceive yourself. And although you may think that being honest with yourself means seeing all your bad points and nothing but your bad points, true honesty requires that you you realize also that you’ve got some good potentials. When you have the proper attitude toward both, okay, then you’re on the path.