

Taking Responsibility

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If the mind were basically good, there'd be no need to train it. You'd just follow whatever impulses come up, and you'd be guaranteed happiness. If the mind were basically bad, you couldn't train it: It would resist training. What this means is that the mind has both good and bad impulses. And our duty is to learn how to figure out which is which—*duty* in the sense that if you want happiness, this is what you've got to do. If you want a happiness you can rely on, a happiness you can trust, you have to learn which of the impulses in the mind you can trust and which ones you can't.

Often, we look into our minds and get the sense we can't trust ourselves, so we look outside for other people, hoping that we can trust them. But you find that their minds are just like yours: They've got a mixture of skillful and unskillful impulses. So when you're looking for friends, looking for people whose advice you can trust, the same issues come up. How to distinguish the people you can trust from those you can't?

If you come to the Buddha, his advice is the most encouraging. He says he's going to teach you how to trust yourself; teach you the skills you need in order to figure out what in the mind is trustworthy and what's not. Because you look at the impulses that come up in the mind: That's birth right there. The process of rebirth on the large scale comes from these impulses right here.

When the Buddha talks about how beings take birth, it's usually one of two impulses. One is desperation: They're suffering really horribly, to the point of death, and they'll just go *anywhere* to get away from that. Well, you know what happens when you have that attitude, "*Anywhere* is better than *this*." You end up in some pretty bad places.

There's that story the Buddha tells about the beings in hell. There's one hell where the walls are so hot that the flames from the west wall reach the east wall; the flames from the east wall reach the west wall; flames from the north reach the south; from the south reach the north; from below reach the top; from the top reach below—there's flame everywhere. And there's a door in each of the walls. The hell beings see one of the doors opening, and they go running to the door to get out. But the door slams shut just as they get there. Then another door opens on the opposite side, so they go running to that door, through all the flame. That door slams shut. So they keep running back and forth through the flame like this. Finally, they get to one of the doors, and it stays open. So they run out and they

land in a hell of shit. So when you have the attitude, “Just anywhere is better than here,” you have no idea where you’re going to end up. That’s desperation.

The other impulse is wantonness. There are cases where people have had a lot of pleasure, and after a while they get tired of that pleasure, and they see a new pleasure, or a potential pleasure, coming along. They say, “Hey, what’s this?” And they just fall for it. And many times, in pursuing the new pleasure, things get worse. It’s because they didn’t stop and consider, “Where is this leading? Where is this going?” This is why, as the Buddha said, if you were to make a comparison with the way beings are born, it’s like throwing a stick up in the air: Sometimes it lands on this end, sometimes it lands on that end, sometimes it comes down smack in the middle. In other words, there’s no progress, there’s no purpose. It’s just wherever your impulses will take you.

The impulses, of course, are affected by your past actions, your old habits. And so what the Buddha tells us is, “If you want to find happiness, you have to look very carefully at these impulses”—particularly in terms of where they go, what they lead to. In other words, you have to be responsible. Most of us are pretty irresponsible in how we live; and when we die and we get reborn, we’re irresponsible as well. We don’t think of the impact that our new birth is going to have on us or on other people. We just go for it.

So if you want to train the mind—train this particular problem in the mind—you’ve got to look at what’s coming up in the mind right now. You’ve got to look at where it goes. When an impulse comes up, ask yourself, “Okay, if I actually act on this, where is it going to take me?” And again, there’s that problem of desperation and wantonness. The desperation is, as I said, “I’ve just got to get out of where I am. *Anything* would be better than this.” And the wantonness is, “I’m just bored where I am right now. Let’s try *this*.” Neither attitude really thinks of consequences. This is why we keep wandering on—wandering aimlessly.

So it’s up to you to decide: Are you going to do this responsibly or not? Do you care about your own happiness? If you do, then you need to put the mind in a position where it’s not so hungry that it’ll go for anything, or where it’s so heedless that it gets tired of one pleasure and will try any new pleasure that come along that seems interesting, seems intriguing, or just gives some variety.

This is, on the one hand, why we practice concentration: to give the mind a sense of pleasure so that it’s not desperate in its movements, so that if something new comes up, you won’t just go running for it just because you want anything but where you are. You want to put yourself in a good place. Focus on the breath; allow it to be comfortable. Learn to investigate the breath. Let the breath capture your imagination—realizing that the breath energy in the body has all kinds of

dimensions: It's not just in the body; there are whole energy fields surrounding the body as well. If you're really sensitive, you can sense those, too. You can look at your energy fields, both inside and out, and ask, "Are they healthy? Or do they need work?" Do they have huge, gaping holes, where you let in other people's energy—regardless of how healthy or unhealthy it might be?

If there's a huge, gaping hole in your energy field, you can't really help but absorb other people's energy or their blockages in different parts of the body. When you make a survey, going through the body, do you notice there are parts of the body that you don't sense as clearly as other parts? Try to trace them out. Exactly what's missing? Try to trace back to where the blockage might be coming from. Sometimes the blockage is not in the same place as the missing part. For instance, a blockage in your lower back may actually be coming from a problem in your neck. Or a blockage in your legs might be coming from a problem in your back.

So learn to explore this, to realize that this is an important part of your potential for happiness. This is going to give you a good place to stay—so that you're not acting out of desperation, running from the hell of fire into the hell of shit. You're in a field of good energy, glowing energy, healthy energy, so you don't have to go running to every door that appears. One of the purposes of concentration is that it allows you to have a sense of well-being so that you're not so hungry for every little impulse that comes up.

You can also start seeing more clearly what's actually going on in the mind. This is where the discernment comes in. Because it can happen that you're working with the breath and things seem to be going fine; you say, "Well, enough of this, what next?" So you have to teach the mind: If anything good is going to happen, it's going to come from allowing the good things you have right here to develop, so that you don't get impatient for, "What's next?" You can start learning to look at the process of how thoughts begin to appear in the field of your energy. There's going to be a little stirring here, or a little knot developing. Then the mind's tendency is to go to the knot and to make another knot. It's as if you're going to knit something. Then, all of a sudden, you find yourself in another thought world. The world is the process of becoming, and the going into that world is birth.

So there's this process right here. This is what you want to study: how the mind takes birth; how you start taking on an identity in one of these little thought worlds. Before you go into it, you can ask yourself, "Is this going to lead to something good, or not?" Often you find that deep down inside you already know, because a lot of the thought worlds are ones we've been through many times before. Just as with many of the choices we have in life: It's often the same thing,

over and over again. But we try to pretend, “This time it’s going to be different.” We pretend to be ignorant. That’s one of our problems.

Because of that old wantonness: the desire, “Let’s just do something *new*—at least something different from where I am right now.” This is where the principle of heedfulness comes in. As the Buddha said, all our skillfulness comes from this quality of heedfulness: thinking about where each action is going to go. It means taking responsibility.

If the Buddha had believed in Buddha-nature, or innate goodness, he would’ve said, “You don’t need to be heedful; just trust your inner nature.” And if anyone would have been qualified to teach about Buddha-nature, it would have been him—but he didn’t. It’s an idea that got added much later into the Buddhist tradition. What he actually said was, “If you want to be skillful, develop this quality of heedfulness. If you really want to be happy, develop this quality of heedfulness.” This is how you bring the practice to consummation, as he said. Those were his last words: “Come to consummation through heedfulness.”

When the mind is still—you’re mindful of the breath, alert to the breath—you want to add discernment to the heedfulness, so that when the mind begins to move, you can tell where it’s going to go, whether it’s going to go to a good place or to a place that’s not so good. Sometimes the pleasure of the concentration will be enough to dissuade you from going places that are not so good. Other times, you have to remind yourself: “Watch out. This is going to have consequences down the line.”

Sometimes there will be thoughts whose consequences you’re not really sure about. In those cases, you have to learn from trial and error. In other cases, the Buddha’s instructions are clear, and it’s just a matter of remembering them and having the wisdom to act on them. If you find an impulse not to act on them, learn how to talk yourself into being willing—at least giving the Buddha the benefit of the doubt. There will be a few cases where you don’t have experience in that area, and the Buddha’s teachings don’t touch on it, and it’s up to you to decide whether you want to experiment in that area or just leave it alone. That’s your choice.

But at least you’re coming from a better place. And you’ve got this principle of heedfulness to remind you, “Okay, the movements of the mind have consequences.” You can’t trust everything that comes up—as they say, “Don’t believe everything you hear; don’t believe everything you think.” Put things to the test. And even in the case of Ajaan Mun—who had visions of devas coming down to give him advice—he didn’t necessarily believe in the visions; he learned he had to treat them with a certain amount of wariness as well. If something sounded reasonable, he put it to the test, to see if it really worked. That’s how you learn;

that's how you come to know: testing things in your actions.

This is how the Buddha said you learn about what's Dhamma and what's not Dhamma: through where it leads when you act on it. Because it's only through the practice that we really do give direction to our lives. Otherwise, we're like that stick thrown up in the air, sometimes falling on this end, sometimes falling on that end, sometimes splat in the middle—it doesn't really have any pattern. Our actions are good for a while, and then we get tired of the effort that has to go into acting good, and we start getting complacent—especially when things seem very pleasant and easy, and wantonness comes in. Then we get hit by the results of *that* and we get desperate, neither of which we can trust: neither the wantonness nor the desperation.

You've got to develop this attitude of heedfulness: that you really seriously want to be happy, and that you're willing to do whatever work is required. After all, the difficulty of the path is next to nothing compared to the difficulty of just allowing yourself to follow your impulses or just believing somebody else.

So the choice is yours. As the Buddha said, there *is* a path to true happiness. And at some point you should give it a try. So the question is, "Why not now?"