

Working Hypotheses

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There's an intentional element in all our experiences. We play an active role, but we don't make things totally up out of nothing. The situations we find ourselves in, to some extent, are shaped by past actions. The past actions provide the raw material from which we, with our present intentions, actually create what we experience right now. Even something as simple as deciding what to focus on, where to put your attention, what to ignore: There's an intentional element there. Which means we're always making choices. We're always trying to decide which choice is the best choice, and there may be a lot of uncertainty around it, but that's the basic nature of a choice. You choose one thing because you think it's better than something else. You see even people who claim that they don't believe in choices, don't believe in dualities, yet they're still making choices. People who believe that everything is determined are still making choices.

The Buddha once went to visit some Jains, who believed that everything you experienced in the present moment was based on past actions. He asked them, "Have you ever noticed when you're doing your self-tortures that you have a lot of pain, and when you're not doing your self-tortures, there's no pain?" Which should indicate that what you're doing right now does play a role in what you're experiencing right now.

What this means is that we're already embedded in a fabric of actions and intentions. Whether we like to think in that way or not, this is the way things are. When you look in the Buddha's accounts of his own quest for awakening you see that there were a lot of things he questioned, but the one thing he never questioned was that your actions do have results, and some actions are more skillful than others, i.e., they give better results than others. That's the only hypothesis that's worth exploring. The opposite hypothesis, that your actions have no results: How could you possibly test it? You have to assume that some actions give better results than others. The question is, which actions are they?

Deep down inside, that's how we're constantly fashioning our experiences: Trying to find the best things to do. And so what the Buddha decided to do—both as his own path and as his way of teaching the path to others—was to take that intentional element, take the fact that we're constantly making choices, and put it to the best use; to follow through with the idea that there must be a better happiness, to see what it was and how far it can go.

He had developed a sense of dismay over the way in which you can't really depend on ordinary pleasures of the world—and he'd had plenty of pleasures to choose from. But he realized that in the end it was totally meaningless. These pleasures would just go away and not leave anything good. Many times they'd leave a bad scar, in the case where he'd done unskillful things to gain those pleasures. So he decided to see if there is a way to find pleasures, a way to find a happiness, that doesn't change into something else—in other words, a happiness that's not subject to aging, illness, and death. Something that's deathless. And so he pursued that question. He made a number of false starts, he went down a number of blind alleys, but eventually found that a deathless happiness is possible. That's what his message is all about. It is possible, through human effort, to find a happiness that doesn't change.

Now there's a lot more to total release, total nibbana, than just the fact that it's a deathless happiness, but that's the aspect he explained to get people on the path. He took something we're doing all the time—shaping our experience—and asked, “What if you tried to shape it in the most skillful way possible? What would that entail?” And it turns out that it develops a lot of good qualities in the mind. Just that desire to find a happiness that's more lasting, more solid, he said: That's the beginning of wisdom.

Take that question: “What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” It's wise because it's based on the realization that your welfare and happiness do depend on your actions, that long-term happiness is possible, and that long-term is better than short term. So wisdom is the first quality developed here.

The second quality is compassion. If you realize that if your happiness depends on people's suffering, they're not going to stand for it. They'll do what they can to end it. And so you want a happiness that doesn't harm anyone. And you that find in order to find that happiness you have to be generous, you have to be virtuous, all of which are activities that help other people. It's not that you're neutral in your impact on other people. You're actually out there helping them. It's impossible to pursue the path without helping others, at least to some extent. And so the serious pursuit of happiness involves compassion.

The third quality is purity, in which you look hard at your actions to make sure they don't harm anybody. They don't harm yourself; they don't harm others. This means reflecting on what you're doing.

The principle starts out with your actions on a day-to-day level, what you do, what you say, how you think about things. You have to anticipate what the results of your actions are going to be, and if you foresee any harm, you have to say, “No,

I'm not going to do that." This is where wisdom comes in again. Some things you like to do are going to cause harm, so you have to be wise in talking yourself out of them. Other things you don't like to do, but they're going to be good. They're going to lead to good results so you have to learn how to talk yourself into doing those things. Learn how to motivate yourself. This, the Buddha said, is an aspect of wisdom.

Then when you're doing something, you look at the results that are actually appearing right now. If you see that any unexpected harm is coming about from your actions, you stop. If you don't see any harm, continue. Then when the action is done you have to look at the long-term results. If you realize that you did harm yourself or did harm others, you want to talk it over with someone else who's on the path, so you can get some ideas about how not to harm people, yourself or others, in that way in the future. And then you make up your mind not to repeat that mistake.

The Buddha says to develop a sense of shame around the mistake. This is not the unhealthy shame that all psychotherapists are telling us is bad for us. It's a healthy shame, i.e., it comes with self-esteem, that that kind of action is beneath you. This comes along with a sense of compunction, realizing that if you repeat that mistake over and over again you're just adding more and more suffering. There's no point in that. If, though, you look at the action you did and see that there were no long-term harmful consequences, then you take joy in the fact that you're on the path. It's through reflecting on your actions in this way that you develop purity.

The same principle applies to your meditation. When we're sitting here, we're engaged in a kind of karma. We make up our minds to stay with a particular object or a particular theme. Even if it's just the idea that you want to stay with a broad awareness, trying to be as equanimous and non-reactive as possible, that is a choice you're making. When you hold on to that perception, that too is an activity. Then you want to look at the results. If the results are good, stick with what you're going.

But you'll find as your concentration develops that there are stages in the concentration. Your sensitivity grows as the mind grows more and more still. You can pick up on levels of disturbance that you might not have noticed at the beginning. It's like walking into a very bright room. At first your eyes have trouble adjusting so you can't see anything in the room. But then as they adjust to the light, you begin to notice the objects in the room. Where there seemed to be nothing before, now you realize there are things in here: things that can get into your way.

In terms of the concentration, you realize that whatever the state you're in there's an element of intention there. It's a kind of karma that's going on, and you're holding different perceptions. You may hold a perception of the body. You may hold a perception of the breath. At first, it's your anchor that enables you to stay here in the present moment. But after a while you begin to realize that your way of perceiving these things may actually still be a disturbance. To begin with, there's the need to adjust the breath so that it feels just right. But when it gets just right, you don't have to adjust it anymore and then you just allow your awareness to settle in and be one with the breath.

This gives rise to a strong sense of energy. The Pali term is rapture, *pīti*, which can also simply mean refreshment—but sometimes it can get overwhelming, in which case you let it go. That doesn't mean you wipe it out. It simply means you're not focused on it. You stay focused on the breath, and you try to stay focused on a level of energy in the body that's more refined. It's like tuning a radio into a more peaceful station. The radio waves are always there for all the stations, it's just a question of which ones you're going to tune-in to so that the movement of the rapture, the movement of the energy, can begin to calm down. You can keep going through the various levels of concentration in this way.

I was talking to someone this morning, who was of the opinion that concentration meant that you were aware only of one object, and everything else was totally blanked out. That's not the case. You can stay with one perception, and other things are there, it's simply that you're not getting actively engaged with them. This is the kind of concentration you can take with you as you get up and walk around. Say, for instance, that you want to stay with that sense of broad knowing. Okay, lots of things are going to come in and out of that sense of broad knowing, but you're going to maintain your perception of "knowing." This is what you're going to keep in mind. It's not that you're going to block out other things. The other things are happening. It's simply that this is the perception you hold on to continually. You're going to stay with the sense of knowing or the sense of the breath in the body, whichever level of breath energy you find best to focus in on. That's your choice.

What you're doing is learning to see that you have these choices in the present moment. You're not totally a victim of whatever's going to come up. Things that come in from the past are like the raw materials, but they're not the actual full experience. The full experience has to have an element of present intention. But it's through the processes of working with the mind like this that you learn the extent to which you can shape things through your present intentions.

In the beginning, it's just a working hypothesis that you have this ability to

shape your experience, and then you test it, as you would with any other working hypothesis. You begin to see what the results are. The ultimate result is a happiness beyond space, beyond time, one that takes you out of these parameters, out of these dimensions. And as I said, the Buddha talks about it as the ultimate happiness, largely as a way of getting you to try to go there. In other words, there's more to release than just ultimate happiness.

It's good in lots of ways. I think there are more than twenty or so epithets for nibbana, all of which focus on one aspect or another of why it's a desirable thing, why it's a desirable goal. But when you hit it, you realize that the epithets don't cover everything. They don't do it full justice. They're just pointers. But everyone who's been there realizes that this is the best thing you can do with this power of intention: to follow the path that takes you there.

So given the fact that we're already caught in this matrix of actions and results, intentions that lead you to either pleasure or pain, the Buddha's teaching us to learn how to make the most of it. Take the fact that you're making choices and see what happens when you try to make those choices as wise and compassionate and as pure as possible.