

## *Believe in Your Actions*

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Ajaan Fuang once said there's one thing you have to believe in when you sit down and meditate, and that's in your actions. It may seem strange that you would have to believe in your actions. After all, you see yourself doing things all day long. But there's more to it than that. You have to believe in the fact that you're actually choosing to do those actions—there's not some outside force acting through you, or some fate forcing you to do things. You also have to believe that your actions have results and that those results are determined by the quality of your mind.

Now, those aren't things you can simply see. After all, it could possibly be true that there's some other force that you don't know anything about forcing you to act, and you just think that you're making choices when you really aren't, or that your actions are having results when they really don't. At the same time, it's easy not to believe that the quality of your intention is going to determine the results of your actions, because you see a lot of people acting out of greed, hatred, and delusion, and yet they seem to be pretty happy, in the short term at least. So it is a matter of belief. And the Buddha's proof simply is a pragmatic one: If you believe in your actions, you'll act more skillfully. He adds that if you really want to put an end to suffering through your own efforts, this is what you have to believe. You have to take this as your working hypothesis.

This is one of the reasons why Buddhists aren't out on the street corners, trying to convert people. For someone to take up the path requires that that person would want to be responsible. A lot of people don't want to be responsible. They'd rather hand things over to some outside force. They'd rather believe either that they're innately bad and they require an outside force to come in and save them, or that they're innately good and there's nothing they really have to do—just relax and allow their innate goodness to shine through. Both ways of thinking are abandoning responsibility.

To take up the Buddha's path, you have to *want* to be responsible. After all, he said, "All things are rooted in desire." He goes on to say in another place that "All skillful qualities are rooted in heedfulness." Heedfulness is what makes you want to take on responsibility. You see that your actions do matter and they can lead either to a lot of suffering or to a lot of happiness, so you want to be very careful about what you do and say and think. This is something you have to *want* to do for it to happen.

So it's good to stop and think: What are your reasons for wanting to be heedful? They start with your desire for happiness. That's what the Buddha is assuming when he teaches. He's teaching for people who want to find true happiness. There's got to be that desire there, otherwise it's not going to happen.

You run into so many teachings nowadays saying that meditation is simply a matter of being or knowing, and you're not supposed to be doing anything. That seems to assume that all you have to do is just relax and everything is going to go okay, i.e., you've got an innately good nature or the Universe works out if you don't interfere.

But things don't work that way. There's the part of the mind that has to be alert but there's also the part of the mind that has to be ardent. You have to want to do things skillfully and you have to put in the effort to figure out what is skillful in any situation. And be willing to learn from your mistakes.

Heedfulness is not easy. It requires that you be very careful and very alert and very discerning in how you judge your actions and their results. This is why motivating yourself to practice is a constant requirement. You have to keep reminding yourself of why you're doing this. When you find your energy flagging, what can you do to get your energy back up? Whether you're heedful or not, you're constantly making choices, you're constantly acting. Each time you let an opportunity for a skillful action go past, you've wasted time. You have to ask yourself, "If you don't do the practice now, if you don't pay careful attention to *this* choice right now, when are you going to start being careful? And if you keep on letting things slide this way, aren't you building up some bad habits that are going to be hard to overcome down the line? And if *you* don't do it, who's going to do it for you?"

So remind yourself of why you want to be heedful. It really does make a difference. That's probably the primary motivating factor in the practice. It breaks out into other motivations. There's the motivation of compassion, when you realize that when you've trained the mind, you really are creating better circumstances for yourself and the people around you. It's a gift.

There's that one passage where the Buddha said, in essence, "You started practicing to find an end to suffering. If you give up on the practice, do you really love yourself?" He doesn't say it in so many words, but that's the basic thrust of that particular passage. This type of motivation is made easier when you've learned how to breathe in a way that really does feel refreshing, so that the meditation is not just something that you're fighting with all the time, because you learn how to create a sense of well-being right here, right now. You can remind yourself that when you're meditating, you feel a lot more nourished. It's a good time to heal all

the wounds in the mind. So heedfulness is not just a harsh taskmaster. There's compassion in the motivation of heedfulness as well.

Otherwise, you can think about all the tears. There's that famous image of the water in the oceans as being less than the tears you've shed in the many, many lifetimes through many cycles of the Universe. Do you want to shed that many more tears before you're ready to practice? The practice is available right now for your own well-being, and for the well-being of people around you, so you want to be careful about what you're doing right here, right now.

A while back I was listening to a Dhamma teacher say that she'd suddenly realized that when she sat down to meditate she really ought to have some idea of what she was doing. In other words, there had to be a purpose in the meditation, a plan. She had been coming from a school of thought where meditation was supposed to be just being open to whatever comes and learning to be accepting of whatever comes.

That's not heedfulness at all. That's a very heedless kind of meditation, a very irresponsible kind of meditation. But at least she now discovered that maybe it *would* be a good thing to decide that you want to stay with the breath during the meditation and to keep coming back to the breath—both because it develops your powers of mindfulness and alertness and also because it's a mature way of showing goodwill for yourself. Easy goodwill is saying, "Well, whatever comes up is okay," and you teach yourself to be, "I'm okay, you're okay, everything is okay." But suffering is not okay. There's a lot more that can be done, there's a much better way you can direct your life. You can work with the breath, and it does give rise to a greater sense of well-being. You can work with the mind, and that gives a greater sense of well-being as you learn how to stay focused and solid in the midst of all the changes that come your way.

After all, we do live in a middle level of being. The Buddha talks about levels of being that are exclusively painful, those that are exclusive pleasant, and then those that are a mixture of pleasant and painful. We're one of the mixtures. Do you want your mind to keep going up and down in line with the mixture? Or do you want to anesthetize it and just say, "Oh well, whatever happens, that's okay." Or do you want to really develop a sense of well-being inside—so that your needs are met without having to depend on the world outside, so that things really are okay? They're okay not because you're just telling yourself to lower your standards. You actually raise your standards as you practice as to what qualifies as real happiness. And you have a practice that allows you to meet those standards.

That's what heedfulness is all about, realizing the range of results that can come from your actions, taking into consideration the story of the Buddha, which

says that through your own actions you can attain absolute, unconditioned happiness. That's the possibility that's open to you. How would you live differently if you took that possibility seriously?

Fortunately, you don't have to keep reinventing the Dhamma wheel. The path is here. And it's humanly possible. The Buddha didn't attain awakening through any special ability that he had that nobody else had. These are abilities we can all work on, we can all develop.

This is what it means to believe in your actions. And this is why everything the Buddha taught centers on actions. The four noble truths seem to be all about suffering and stress—however you want to translate *dukkha*—but the pattern is that these things come from your actions. The end of suffering and stress also comes from your actions. This is why the Buddha talks about action so much. He calls his teaching a *kammavadi*, a teaching about action.

That's why right view grows immediately into right resolve. Because there are skillful and unskillful actions, you want to abandon unskillful ones and replace them with skillful ones. The whole rest of the path grows from that. So what we want to find out is, okay, what's the payoff when you really believe in your actions? Well, it's not anything you're going to know just by looking or thinking. It's something you learn by doing.

Mundane right view grows into transcendent right view through the Buddha's description of generosity and virtue and the rewards, followed by his description of how those actions—which we've all experienced, we've all engaged in—lead to rewards that are good but have their drawbacks. The purpose of that teaching is to inspire you to be ready to listen to the four noble truths, to think about, "What would it be to put an end to the causes of suffering, totally?"

As for mundane right resolve, that grows into transcendent right resolve by actually putting the principles of right view into practice, learning how to divide your thoughts into skillful and unskillful in terms of the actions they lead to—and then finally realizing that even skillful thoughts can wear out the mind. That brings the mind to right concentration, which is transcendent right resolve.

So everything is about action. Even the teaching in itself is a type of action, and it's meant to lead to more actions. All that's asked is that you believe in your actions. And from that everything else grows.