

The Wisdom of Self-regulation

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The Buddha had only two teachings that he said were categorical—in other words, true across the board in every situation. One was that skillful qualities should be developed and unskillful ones should be abandoned. The other was the four noble truths: stress, the cause of stress, the cessation of stress, and the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.

Both of those teachings have built-in imperatives. The first one is obvious: If something skillful comes up in your mind, you want to develop it, to nurture it, to help it to grow. If something unskillful comes up in the mind, you want to learn how to get rid of it. With the four noble truths the imperatives are that stress is something to be comprehended, its cause is to be abandoned, the cessation of stress is to be realized, and the path to the cessation should be developed.

You can probably see the connection between the two. The cause of stress is to be abandoned, just like unskillful qualities; and the path is to be developed, like skillful qualities in general. The reason these teachings have imperatives built-in is because our mind is constantly acting. We're not just sitting here passively receiving things. We're shaping our experience. And we need direction on how to shape it wisely, because we suffer when we shape our experience of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas in unskillful ways. We relate to the world as a whole in unskillful ways, both in figuring out what we want out of the world and how to go about it. So because the mind is active, it needs directions on how to act skillfully.

A lot of people come to Buddhism and they don't like hearing this. They'd rather hear that there's nothing to gain, nothing to let go of; just be in the present moment and accept whatever happens. Well, that's an instruction of one kind but it doesn't really get you very far. If you're really neurotic, that's a way of getting some rest. But the Buddha wants to take you further than that, to a point where there really is no suffering in the mind—the mind is totally free, totally without limits—and that requires work. We have to learn how to straighten out the mind, all the unskillful habits we have. This process of self-regulation is something that has to be learned.

Think about the committee of voices in your head telling you to do this, not to do that. They have lots of different ideas. To learn how to not listen to the unskillful voices, and to listen to the skillful ones and to recognize which is which: That's a real skill. A lot of discernment has to go into that. It helps to have good

examples of people who live by the teachings and not get all tied-up in knots, to show you somewhat how it's done, but you also have to learn how to sort things out on your own.

So for the time being as you're sitting here meditating, any thought that has to do with staying with the breath: Take that as a skillful thought. Any thought that wants to pull you away. Take that as something unskillful. There are relative levels of skill in both cases, because sometimes the thoughts that tell you to stay with the breath shout at you, and they shout at you for a good reason because your mind is going to slip off into something really unskillful if you don't pay careful attention. At other times they shout at you in a way that gets you discouraged.

So you have to keep a close watch on what the voices are saying, how they're saying it, how you react. Try to develop, as much as you can, a really matter-of-fact attitude toward what's skillful and what's not, so that if you catch yourself doing something unskillful, you don't get yourself all tied up in knots around it and yet you are able to let it go. That's the sense of "just right" you want to develop. The same with skillful qualities. You want the voices to encourage you to keep you going but not to push you so hard that you break.

This is why the Buddha talks about the path as being a middle way where the voices in your mind, the imperatives that you tell yourself, are wise and they're just right. They get the results you want. That's how you know that things are balanced and that you really are following the middle way. You tell the mind to settle down, and it settles down. This is going to take time and there's going to be a fair amount of back and forth. You have to learn patience.

A lot of the ajaans in Thailand noticed that when they were getting Westerners to come study with them, the two big problems they had were patience and equanimity. So that's what they taught them. Some people came away from those teachings thinking that that was all there is. Actually those are just the beginning.

When the Buddha was teaching Rahula how to meditate, the first thing he taught him was, "Make your mind like earth. Disgusting things get thrown on the earth, but the earth doesn't react. Make your mind like water. Water's used to wash away dirty things but water doesn't react or get disgusted. Make your mind like fire. Fire's used to burn up garbage but it's not disgusted by the garbage. Make your mind like wind. Wind blows dirty things around but the wind itself isn't disgusted by the dirt." In other words, you're going to meet up with things that you don't like, both in the body and in your own mind, and you have to learn how to accept that fact so that you can work with them.

Because the Buddha didn't stop right there. He then taught Rahula breath

meditation, and that involves a fair amount of proactive working with your breath: learning how to breathe in a way where you're sensitive to the whole body; learning how to breathe in a way where you're calming the effect of the breath on the body; learning how to breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of rapture and refreshment in the body; breathing in a way that gives rise to a sense of pleasure and ease. These things just don't happen on their own. You have to engage in some trial and error until you reach a point of trial and success.

So you use patience so that you can observe things carefully and develop this matter-of-fact attitude. If something doesn't work, okay, it didn't work, so try something else.

There's a story I read about years back about a famous swimmer who was going to compete in the Olympics. They were hoping that he was going to sweep all the medals. And in the first race he didn't. He came in second. The people were afraid: "Well, that's it. He's just going to go into a downward spin from here on in," but his coach said, "Don't underestimate him." And sure enough, he went on and won the gold medals in all the remaining matches. It was because he didn't let that first match get him down. He knew how to spring back.

So when you find yourself doing something unskillful, either in the way you're focusing or in the way your mind is talking to itself, and you get upset about what you said to yourself and then get upset about that and then, it just keeps snowballing: You've got to learn how to put a stop to that. Learn how to step back and say, "Well, just breathe through it. Try again. Try again."

Part of the problem may be that our culture is a very unforgiving one. We have one shot at making it in society, they usually say. Of course, it's based on a religion that gives you one shot. You've got this one lifetime and then there's going to be either eternal reward or eternal damnation. Which is a very unforgiving way of thinking.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha's teachings on rebirth are so helpful. If we don't make it this time, we've got another chance. Now, the other chances may not come for a while. As the Buddha said, "Your chance of being reborn as a human being is right away is pretty slim." But at least you've got more chances, and there's not some arbitrary person up there who's going to damn you forever for one little mistake, or praise or reward you for one little change of heart. Karma is a lot more fair in that area, and it gives you a chance to start over, start over, start over.

So learn to think in a way that "Okay, you make a mistake. Recognize it as a mistake but it's not something that's going to cause you trouble forever." Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and then try better the next time. Try better the

next time. Try to develop the ability to spring back and to cut through a lot of the recriminations that would otherwise tie you down.

This is probably the secret to skillful self-regulation: having some patience, having some endurance, having some equanimity about what you're doing—and, at the same time, having the confidence that the skills you're being asked to do can be done. The Buddha wouldn't teach anything that human beings can't do. Sariputta was the one that said that "If it were impossible to find happiness through developing skillful qualities, the Buddha wouldn't have said to try to develop skillful qualities. If it were impossible to abandon unskillful ones, he wouldn't have taught you to do that." It is possible to do these things, and whether it takes a lot of time or just a little time, we're not here racing with one another. We're working things out, each of us, within ourselves.

So if things are taking time, don't get down on yourself for that. Just remind yourself, "Okay, I've got one more chance here, another chance, then another one, then another one." Keep trying to do it better and better and better, as you can. And keep a sense of humor about this.

I've told you the story before about the Englishman who went across the Northwest Territories back in the 1820s with a group of Dene. He noticed that on the days when the hunting was bad, when they couldn't get enough to eat, those were the days when they joked among themselves the most. They knew how to keep their spirits up.

So do your best to keep your spirits up. This is another important part of self-regulation, because even though you may have a teacher here to watch you and to give you advice, you're the one who has to internalize the advice. And the results are going to come from your efforts—and in particular, your ability to exercise your powers of what the Buddha calls *vimansa*, which is the active part of your intelligence: checking to see what's working, what's not working, and then trying to figure out new ways to make things work better. It's discernment in action. As the Buddha said at one point, "Your ability to get yourself to do things you don't like doing but you know are going to give good results, or to stop yourself from doing things that you like doing but you know are eventually going to give bad results in the long term: That's an important measure of your wisdom."

Usually when we think about Buddhist wisdom we think about fairly paradoxical and abstract things, but the real wisdom starts right here: in your ability to regulate your own actions, to follow the imperatives that the Buddha set forth, i.e. to develop what's skillful and to abandon what's not. That way, you take the active part of your mind, the part that really is aimed at goals and aimed at accomplishing something, and use it to your advantage.

I was listening this evening to a French TV program where a Buddhist teacher was talking about the effort of no effort and the effort of not having any goal. And I kept wondering, “Why on earth are people attracted to this? Why do they want to be told there is no goal?” That you’re just perfect as you are, I guess. It’s kind of a laziness—a reaction to the unforgiving and goal driven nature of our society.

But when you can step back from that a bit, you begin to realize that there really *are* problems in the mind and they really do require work—and here’s a good set of instructions on how to deal with those problems. So why suffer if you don’t have to?

Now, as the Buddha said his imperatives are conditional. If you want to find true happiness, this is what you have to do. He’s not forcing them on you. But he *is* saying that if you’re really sincere in your desire for happiness, you’ve got to buckle down and then bring all your intelligence to learning how to follow this path with skill, with finesse, so that you don’t run yourself into the ground in the one extreme, and you don’t just wander off in the clouds in the other. You want to stay on course, and this ability to be self-regulating is one of the essential factors of the wisdom that’ll get you there.