

It's All about Action

August 11, 2015

Notice that meditation instructions always tell you what to do. Even the ones that say to simply “be with” whatever comes up: That’s an instruction on what to do. To be non-reactive, to be one with things: That’s always a doing.

This relates to the fact that meditation is a kind of activity, a kind of karma. As with all the Buddha’s teachings, if you understand these things in terms of karma, you really understand them a lot better than if you try take them without karma.

There’s a very popular tendency in modern Buddhism to want to have the Dharma without karma—in other words, to explain morality, explain meditation, to explain all aspects of Buddhist practice without reference to the teaching on karma. But that then leaves big holes in those explanations, so they take other teachings and stuff them in. Interconnectedness suddenly becomes the basis for our morality. A sense of no separate self becomes our goal. None of this has anything to do with what the Buddha taught.

He taught, as he said, action of different kinds. But particularly he taught the action that leads to the end of action, or the karma that leads to the end of karma. “Karma” here has both meanings: in terms of the action that’s done and the results of the action. We’re looking for something that’s beyond action, but to get there you have to do actions. One of the important actions, of course, is learning to how to train your mind to be still and learn how to find where your clingings and attachments are and let go of them.

As for what you’re going to find when you’ve let go of all your clingings, the Buddha gives just a few indications. He says that it’s a state of ultimate happiness, ultimate freedom, and it lies beyond the six senses. In other words, you don’t know it through the eyes or the ears or the nose or the tongue or the body—or even through your regular consciousness that’s aware of the six senses. It’s something outside of that entirely. That’s pretty much all he says.

What he talks a *lot* about is how to get there, and that’s where the actions come in. So right now, what are you doing? You should be focusing on your breath or any other of the meditation topics that keep you right here in the present moment. If you’re with the breath, the breath itself is a kind of activity. Even though the body would breathe on its own, say, as when you’re asleep, the fact that you’re alert and watching it means you’re automatically going to start fiddling with the breath. So fiddle well.

In other words, try to figure out: What way of breathing right now is going to

be most satisfying for the body, most satisfying for the mind? Can you breathe in a way that nourishes all the nerves? Think of the breath energy—and of course thinking of the breath energy here is another kind of action. It's a perception. Perceive the breath energy coming in and out of the pores, nourishing all the nerves, nourishing all the blood vessels. Breathe in with a sense of fullness; breathe out with a sense of total relaxation: relaxation of the body.

Don't totally relax your mind. You have to be alert. You have to be on top of this. That's an important distinction: When we focus on parts of the body, we tend to tense them up. So you've got to learn a new skill: Learn how to focus on something at the same time relaxing it.

Find some part of the body where it's easy to think, "Relax," and the body responds. Then, when you get used to that, you can start moving to other parts of the body, areas where you tend to hold more tension. Can you focus on them and relax them at the same time? That's an important skill: the skill that helps you stay with the body without putting undue pressure on different parts of the body. This way, you can stay here longer and longer. In this way, you get to see your mind in action: where its intentions are, what counts as an intention.

The kind of karma you're going to be encountering as you meditate is of three kinds. It could be the results of past actions coming in, and that can be anything from pains you may feel in the body to your habitual ways of thinking. If you've been meditating, some of the skills you've picked up from your past meditation should be coming in to help, too.

Then there are your present intentions and the results of your present intentions. You want to learn to read those two very carefully. When the Buddha's talking about the causes for suffering, they lie in the present intentions. The fact that things are coming in from the past good or bad: Those aren't causing suffering. It's what your mind does with them in the present: That's the cause.

So you're looking at the mind in action. Your meditation is a form of karma and at the same time it allows you to look directly at karma as you're doing it. You begin to see where the ways you intend to focus on the breath are helping, whereas other ways of focusing on the breath are not. Sometimes something will come in from the past, and one part of you in the present will say, "I want to go with that," and just takes off, like someone who's married and suddenly somebody else shows up and they run off together.

Well, come back. Those people who encourage you to run off: They don't have any real concern for you. They're like Vronsky in *Anna Karenina*, the only difference being here is that the object you should be married with right now is something really good for you. So stay right here.

Learn to be comfortable right here, comfortable in noticing what you're doing and having a sense that you're doing it well. This is going to take time. As with any skill, you have to learn how to encourage yourself on the one hand, and be very meticulous about judging yourself on the other. In other words, you're judging yourself not with the purpose of making yourself feel bad about mistakes but with the purpose of noticing: "I did this mistake. What can I do to do it differently?" Again, look at this as a kind of action. Don't think about what kind of person you are or who you are right now. Just think about what you're doing and what you could do better. This applies to everything.

We were talking today about the question of having a sense of self when things get very tenuous in the mind and very refined. You suddenly realize you have a strong sense of self in there. You tell yourself you want to let it go, but there's a lot of resistance. You feel like you would have nothing if you didn't have that sense of self. Well, the way to get around that fear of nothing is not even to think about what your self is. What your self *is* is an issue that the Buddha put aside. When he was asked point-blank, "Is there a self? Is there no self?" he didn't answer. He also said that the questions, "Do I have a self? Do I have no self?" should be put aside in general across the board.

What he *does* have you focus on is: "What am I doing right now? Is it skillful? What are the actions I'm doing? What are the results I'm getting? Do things I do raise the level of stress and suffering in the mind or do they lower it? If they're raising it, what can I do to change it? If they're lowering it, what can I do to keep on doing those lowering things, so I can get sensitive to even more subtle levels of stress?" Then you look again, "What I am I doing to create those levels of stress?" It's all about action and result.

Even the teachings on emptiness—the original teachings on emptiness—are all about action and result. You look at your state of mind and you realize that as you sit here right now, "It's empty of a lot of the concerns I had when I was at home. And empty of a lot of the other concerns I could be carrying around right now. Is there still something here that's not empty of disturbance? Is it the way I'm focusing here or something I'm holding in mind that's disturbing?" Well, let that go. Then appreciate the sense of emptiness, empty of disturbance, that arises when you let that go.

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You begin to realize that when a sense of self comes up, you see it, not so much as what you are, but just as an action, and there's some stress that goes with it. What would happen if you dropped that, if you stopped doing that? You're suspending the question of whether there's something behind all this or not, but

you *are* looking at what you're doing and trying to figure out: "What can I do to do it better?" That way, you cut through the whole issue of clinging to the sense of self, not through the idea of self, but through your sensitivity to your actions. When you take the issue on from the side that way, you find that the mind is a lot more willing to let go. And it's through the letting go that there's release.

So it's all about action. You see suffering as a kind of action, you see the causes of suffering as kinds of action, and you see the things you could do to do differently to put an end to that suffering as kinds of action.

Everything talked about in the Dhamma relates to actions. When people talk about interconnectedness: We're connected through our actions. We're not connected through anything else. What kind of connections do we have? It's not something we are born with, aside from the results of past actions. These connections are created right now as we're acting. Then act well so that the connections are good, as long as you need connections. But ultimately you find the mind is a lot better off without connections to anything at all.

So again, you look at your actions. When you learn to interpret the Buddha's teachings all in the context of how they relate to actions, you understand them a lot better: where he's coming from and what the teachings are supposed to do. The Dhamma is connected with action. The four noble truths have their duties.

The meaning of the Dhamma: the word *attha* is often paired in Thailand with the word Dhamma. It means "meaning": what the Dhamma means but also what its use is, what its purpose is, what the profit of it is. The word *Dhamma* itself means action in some contexts—and the *attha* is where it's supposed to take you when you act properly.

So if any question comes up in your meditation or your reading, ask yourself, "How does this relate to action?" That'll cut away a lot of the confusion that would otherwise grow up around the Dhamma and get in your way.