

The Mind Undefined

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The Buddha's teachings are all about training the mind, but he never defines what the mind is. This is, apparently, a deliberate strategy on his part, because as he says, if you define yourself, you limit yourself. If you have a certain set idea of what your mind is or what you are, and you hold on to that idea, it places limitations on what you can do, what you think you can know.

Reading about the tradition of Romanticism in our culture, one of the things I noticed again and again is that people within that tradition define what you are as one of their beginning propositions. Then it turns out, oops, that based on that definition, you run into some limitations on what you can know or do.

That wasn't the Buddha's approach at all. His beginning question was, what can we do to put an end to suffering? How far can that desire go? How far can we act on it; to what extent can the mind do this? And in the course of discovering what he could do, he learned a lot about the mind that he wouldn't have learned otherwise.

So try to be careful. Don't let your idea of who you are or what you are get in the way of what you can do, because the whole point of the practice is, as the Buddha showed in his own practice, figuring out what you're doing that's causing suffering and how you might change what you're doing.

You see this again and again in his life story. He kept coming up against a brick wall. He studied with a particular teacher and discovered, whoops, that this is only as far as this teaching can go. Is that as far as any teaching can go? Let's try something different. So when he came to the end of the teachers he could study with, he tested first the path of self-torture and discovered that that didn't work. He backed up and said, "Is there an alternative?" Eventually he found the right alternative, through trial and error.

That's the story of the Buddha's life, up until his awakening, at which point it was trial and success. But the errors taught him something. He had been doing something wrong without fully realizing what it was, then he realized what it was he was doing and asked, "Is it possible to do something else, to do things in a different way?"

As he said, this was one of the secrets to his awakening: not resting content with skillful qualities. In other words, he kept asking, "Is there something more skillful than this?" Sticking with that question requires a lot of determination. This is one of the reasons why a lot of people didn't make it to awakening ahead of the Buddha. It's all too easy to say, "This is as far as I can go." You learn to content yourself with a little bit of peace or a little bit of knowledge and say, "That's enough," when actually you could push further.

One of the reasons why we meditate is to strengthen the mind so that it is able to push

further, to the point where it has a chance to ask that big question, “Is it possible to put an end to suffering, totally?”

Here again, the Buddha didn’t define what suffering is. He simply gave examples. He boiled things down to five clinging-aggregates, but those are things you have to explore. Those are activities that you do. Your clinging to the aggregates is an activity, and the aggregates that you cling to are activities. The question is, in every case, can you do those activities in a different way?

So it’s good to leave some things undefined, especially in terms of what you are. What exactly suffering is, is something you discover as you work on the path. Your idea of what counts as *dukkha*—stress, suffering—gets more and more refined as your practice develops. The same with your mind: Your sense of your own mind gets more refined as you practice. And the same with true happiness: Your idea of what counts as genuinely happy will develop as you practice.

This is why it’s good not to define these things too specifically ahead of time. The things the Buddha *does* define are activities, things you can do: approaches you can take and those you shouldn’t take. This is how we learn about the mind, this is how we learn about the problem of suffering and how we learn about true happiness: by looking at our actions and learning how to evaluate them.

So as you’re sitting here meditating, the question isn’t who you are. The question is: What are you doing, and are the results satisfactory? Do you like the results you’re getting from your meditation? If not, then ask yourself, “What could I be doing differently?” And here is where it’s especially useful not to have things too clearly defined ahead of time, in terms of what you are, because you can ask yourself, “What are things I didn’t think I was able to do, based on what I thought I was?” Maybe your self-definition is one of the things getting in the way of actually doing something that could put an end to suffering.

This is what the teachings are for: to give you ideas of possibilities that might not have occurred to you otherwise or may have occurred to you only after a very, very, very long time. We read the teachings for the possibilities that they open up and then we try them out, but we learn through our own actions.

When the Buddha was teaching the Kalamas, he said not to go by something simply because it’s in the texts, or simply because it makes sense to you, because a lot of things that make sense are not true. A lot of things that are in texts may not be true. What you do is, you figure out, “What are the practical implications of this teaching and when I put it into practice, what kind of results do I get?” Everything gets tested in your actions: in your thoughts, in your words, in your deeds. You also listen to the counsel of the wise and the people around you who you know are the wisest—so that you’re not just going on your own lights. You’re learning to raise your standards to theirs.

It’s all about action; it’s all about what you’re doing. When you don’t define yourself too

clearly, you find that you open yourself up to all kinds of approaches toward your actions. Reading recently about secular Buddhism, I've noticed that their basic assumption is that, well, we're just biological organisms, so how could we know anything deathless? Let's just content ourselves with what makes us feel good in the present moment.

That's an approach that starts out with what you are, and people who follow it are unwilling to let go of that definition, even though it places huge limitations on what they can do and know.

Leave that question of what you are ill-defined and look more at the kind of actions you're doing. You'll find that your sense of what you are, at least as a working idea, will depend on what you're doing. If you're going to be something, be a meditator. Be a meditator who tries to do the meditation well, someone who really does want to put an end to suffering. In other words, focus your sense of what you are on the things that are really worth desiring. As the Buddha said, we really do define ourselves by our desires, so define yourself around good desires.

If we have too clear a notion of what we are as an entity beforehand, it gets in the way of our seeing how mercurial our identities are. We can change from one identity to another very quickly, all based on how our desires change. So you want to see that process in action. Identity is a result of a process. It, too, is the result of an activity. So focus on the actions and look at the identities as a byproduct, because there will come a point in the practice, as the Buddha said, where there's no more desire. When there's no more desire, there's no more way of defining you at all. This is why when they talk about the arahant, they can't say the arahants, after death, either exist or don't exist or both or neither because you can't define what they are. When you can't define *what* something is, you can't talk about its existence or non-existence. Arahants are totally free of desire, so there's no definition there at all.

So the path starts out with an undefined sense of who you are and ends beyond definition as well. The things that are defined are the actions you can do in the meantime. Right mindfulness is defined as a type of action. Right concentration is defined as a series of actions. Learn to focus on those actions, and on doing them well, and let the question of who you are or what you are take care of itself.