

Working Hypotheses

January 4, 2017

We bring the mind to the breath, and we get it to stay there with a sense of ease. Not only because this is a good place to be in the present moment, but also because it's a good path—it takes us to a good place. We trust that that's so.

When the Buddha teaches right view, in the very beginning we have to take it on trust, as a working hypothesis. Not only the teachings on karma and rebirth, but also the teachings on the four noble truths. We don't know for sure that they're going to take us to awakening or to a safe place, but they make sense.

You have to think about the position the Buddha was in as a teacher. As he said, he could see various paths, like a person hovering above a forest, looking at various paths going through the forest. He saw that some of the paths led to a pit of burning embers, some of the paths to a cesspool, some of the paths to a nice lake, some to a comfortable mansion—although it's interesting, the comfortable mansion in his terms was not the best destination of all. It was his image for a heavenly rebirth. The best destination was a big lake with nice shady banks, where you could drink the water in the lake and swim around and then rest on the bank. That was his image for nibbana. He saw people going on different paths to these various places. The people going on the paths to the pit of burning embers or the cesspool: They weren't going along those paths because they knew that they were going there—they *liked* the path they were on.

But as the Buddha said, he could see that these were bad paths, taking them to a bad place. So when he's teaching us, he's seeing that we're already going on various paths and the question is: are we going along good paths already or is there a better path to follow? He gives us reasons for changing our paths if we're on a bad path, but you have to take those reasons on trust. Even reason is not a guarantee, as he said. Something can be very reasonable and yet still be wrong.

But we've seen to some extent for ourselves, for example with karma: There's a lot about karma that's not all that hard to accept. The idea that you do have choices, that your choices make a difference in your life, that they really do have results. Some of the choices have an impact right now and some will have an impact further down the line. All that's pretty easy to accept and actually gives meaning to life.

I know some who prefer to think that everything is determined, because they don't want to be responsible for anything. But then that doesn't leave them any choices. It doesn't give much hope. A path with hope has to say that your actions do make a difference, and you can change the way you act if you want.

Of course, the teaching on karma goes beyond that, when the Buddha talks about how these actions will have an impact not only in this lifetime but also in lifetimes to come. And

that good actions will definitely have good results. It may take a while, but the quality of the intention is what's going to determine the quality of the result. Now, there are times in our lives when we like to think along those lines, and other times when we prefer not to. We know we've done some things under pretty bad intentions and we'd rather not have the consequences of those come and catch up with us.

But if you want to be consistent—that's one of the things the Buddha emphasizes, the consistency of right view—then we've got to learn how to put up with the bad along with the good. That means you have to develop skill, which is what we're working on right now. So he's basically saying that your development of skill is what's going to make the difference between your happiness or lack of happiness in life. We take that principle on trust. Some of the other details may be a little bit more than we can get our minds around right now, but it's good to give them a try.

You know that exercise where they get people to get together in groups and say, "Imagine that you have only one year left in your life, how would you change the way you live this year?" They get together every couple weeks and talk about it, and they find that their lives become much more focused on what's really meaningful to them. Well, you can give it a try: Suppose you really did believe in rebirth—how would you act? You'll see that it makes you more responsible about your actions.

The same with the four noble truths: The Buddha's basically saying in the four truths that the reason we suffer is that we hug our suffering to ourselves. The things that we love the most are the things that cause us to suffer the most. That truth goes against the grain, but we've probably noticed that, yes, it does apply to a lot of things in life. So, what if we applied that insight to everything?

One of the forms of suffering is not getting what you want. And the way the Buddha defines that is by saying that we all want not to grow ill, not to die, we don't want to have any separation. And yet once you're born, these things are going to happen. These things are not to be wished away, and not to be gained just by wanting—lack of illness, lack of death. But he doesn't say, well, just stop wanting and you'll be okay. He basically says, take that desire and bring some skill to it. There are skills you can master, so that you don't have to experience aging, illness, and death. You don't have to suffer from these things in this lifetime and you won't have to suffer from them afterwards either. If you gain full awakening, you won't even experience them at all after death.

There's something that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die, where there's no sense of separation at all. Again, that's something we have to take on faith. In the four noble truths, the third noble truth is something the Buddha can't show us. Ajaan Maha Boowa has an interesting statement. He says that if the Buddha could have taken nibbana out and put it out on the market for everyone to see, nothing else would get bought in the world. Everybody

would want just nibbana. It's that amazing. But it's not the kind of thing that the Buddha can take out or that any of the noble disciples can take out and show us.

They can talk about it, and they can tell us how to get there and provide us with some motivation for getting there. Because when the Buddha's teaching right view, it's directions on how to act. When he's talking about mundane right view and the principles of skillful action and unskillful action, he's basically saying that skillful action should be done, unskillful action should be avoided. See, there's a *should* there.

With the four noble truths, there are duties: Suffering is to be comprehended, its cause is to be abandoned, its cessation is to be realized, and the path is to be developed. And he also tells us why. It's not the case that he just says, do this, do this and you'll understand afterwards. He gives us some reasons, so that we can have some idea why this would work. Those are our working hypotheses.

So as I was saying today, it's at the point of gaining your first taste of awakening where your confidence in these hypotheses is confirmed, but you don't just sit around and wait for awakening to come before you say, "Yes, this is true," and then act on them. We're all willy-nilly acting as we take every breath. We're on a path of some kind, as we take every breath we're forced to make choices all the time. We're trying to decide what kind of action is worthwhile, what kind of action is going to be worth the effort that goes into it. This is something we're doing all the time, and the Buddha's giving us some perspective so we can re-calculate as to what's really worth doing in life, what's worth letting go. He doesn't force this on anyone, but then the fact of suffering in our lives does force us—we've got to make a choice of some kind.

And we have the example of the noble ones before of us. This is one of the reasons why confidence that there are people who know these things is part of right view. A while back I was talking to a Buddhist scholar who was saying that he couldn't get his head around the idea that a human being could know something unconditioned. After all, we're just conditioned beings and all we can know are conditioned things. And I had to tell him he had it all backwards. He was starting with his definition of what people are, and from there he decided what people can know. The Buddha did it the other way around: He worked to see what could be known, what could be attained through human effort. And he found that the deathless can be attained, which meant that he had to rethink what a human being can be. And that's what we've got to do to: rethink what we can be, rethink what we can do. The Buddha's giving us the perspective for that. Otherwise, we'd be trapped in our old conditioned ways of thinking.

As I told that scholar, he was like a person who can read only three letters at a time. He sees the word *antelope*, and all he sees is *ant*. Then someone tells him, "It's not just *ant*, it's *antelope*." And then he replies, "Well, ants don't elope. It doesn't make any sense." So he's going to stick with the ants.

There's a lot more to the Dhamma than you can get your head around—if you haven't practiced. And even when you do practice, it's not just a matter of getting your head around it. It's a matter of getting your whole head and body around it, your whole being around it. As the Buddha says, you *see* it with the body when you gain awakening. You *touch* it with the body. In other words, it's not just a head-experience, it's a whole, all-of-you experience.

Fortunately, it's nothing you have to clone. It's nothing you *can* clone. It's not by imagining it that you're going to get there. The Buddha gives you steps that you can actually do, and they will lead the mind to a point where those steps will bear fruit. We take all this on trust, but the Buddha seems to be a pretty trustworthy person. The ajaans seem to be trustworthy people. And we'll find that as we follow the practice ourselves, we become more trustworthy, too.

Fortunately, the path doesn't save all of its rewards for the end. There are lots of good things we develop within ourselves as we follow the path. We become more generous, more virtuous, less harmful. We find that our goodwill can extend further than it ever had before. And as the concentration gets developed, we find that we're a lot more solid. We begin to see the results as they come.

But remember the story of the elephant hunter. The elephant hunter needs a big bull elephant to do heavy work, so he goes into the forest and he sees some large elephant footprints. But he doesn't immediately jump to the conclusion that they're the footprints of a bull elephant. After all, there are dwarf females with big feet. But still, the footprints looked promising, so he follows them. He sees scratch marks up in the trees, but again he doesn't come to the conclusion that those scratch marks were made by a big bull elephant, because there are tall females with tusks. They're tall, but they're not as heavy-set as the bull elephant, so they can't do the work he wants. So he still doesn't come to the conclusion it's got to be a bull elephant. But the tracks look promising, so he follows them. He finally gets to a clearing and there it is, the big bull elephant, and he knows for sure.

In the same way, the Buddha says the footprints of the elephant stand for right concentration. The scratch marks stand for the psychic powers that come from concentration. Even people who get strongly concentrated minds and psychic powers still don't know for sure that what the Buddha taught was true. It's when they've had their first taste of awakening—stream entry: That's when they see the big bull elephant in the clearing. That's when they know for sure.

So we follow these steps because they look promising. And then we have to see for ourselves whether what the Buddha said is true, that there really will be a big bull elephant in the clearing. Up to that point, there are going to be some doubts, but look at where your doubts will take you. To a path where action doesn't mean anything. Where the end of suffering is not possible. Would you want to live in that world? Here's a world where your actions have meaning and they can lead to true happiness. It's a good working hypothesis to take on.