

What Should & Shouldn't Be Done

July 30, 2019

Focus on your breath and think of the breathing as a whole-body process. Let your conscious awareness spread out and fill the body. And then from the enlarged perspective, ask yourself, “What kind of breathing would feel good?” If there are parts of the body that are tight and tense, that are not participating in the breath, allow them to relax. And anything else that comes into your awareness right now, you don't have to get engaged with it. Even the sound of the Dhamma talk: Let that be in the background.

The purpose of the talk is to act as a fence so that when there's any temptation to leave the breath, you run into the sound of the talk that reminds you: You want to stay with the breath. Of course, the talk serves other purposes aside from that. After all, it's here to give you some guidance. The duty of the speaker is to follow the duty the Buddha said that any good teacher has, which is to give you a basis for deciding what should and shouldn't be done.

You are an active person. Your mind is active. It's not just sitting there like a clam, receiving input from outside. It's out looking for things. You see this very clearly when you try to focus on the breath, and it seems like not all of the mind is on board with this process. It goes out looking for other things to get interested in, to think about, to feed on. And this is when the mind needs some advice as to what should and shouldn't be done. The Buddha provides that in several ways.

One is in his teachings on karma, emphasizing the fact that you do have choices here in the present moment. The present moment is not totally determined by the past. It's not determined by some god or your own past actions. There will be influences coming in from the past, but you have the right to choose among those influences. In fact, what you're choosing in the present moment is what creates the present moment out of the raw material that comes from the past. And knowing that much makes you realize how important it is to see your own mind in action, to see how it's making these choices.

Then, on top of that, the Buddha gives specific advice: what things are worth developing, what things are worth abandoning. There was a point where one of his students was defending the Buddha because the Buddha was refusing to take a position on lots of the hot philosophical issues of the time: whether the world is eternal or not, or infinite or not, whether the soul was the same thing as the body, or something else. Sectarians of other sects were saying, “He's a nihilist. He doesn't teach anything.” And the student defending him said, “No. He teaches

one thing very clearly, and that's that skillful actions should be developed and unskillful things should be abandoned." The student went back and reported the conversation to the Buddha, and the Buddha confirmed that what he said was right.

There is this basic dichotomy that runs all the way through the teachings. You see this clearly, of course in the four noble truths: two courses of action, one course leading to suffering, another course leading to the end of suffering. And here again, he recommends that you abandon the cause of suffering and that you develop the path to the end of suffering. This dichotomy runs all the way, even to his teachings on dependent co-arising, which are considered his most advanced teachings, in which he goes into a lot of detail of what the causes of suffering are. Sometimes we're told that this is a teaching that's non-dual because it doesn't talk about a self or an object. It just talks about processes in the mind.

But there's one big dichotomy in the Buddha's explanations of dependent co-arising, which is that if you approach the different factors with ignorance of the four noble truths, you're going to suffer. If you approach them with knowledge of the four noble truths—in other words, knowledge of what leads to the end of suffering, what should and shouldn't be done—then those factors turn into the path and ultimately fall away and there you are: at the end of suffering.

So this is one of the reasons why we study the Dhamma, because we're faced with choices and the Dhamma gives us some good advice. And then in areas that are not covered by the teaching, the Buddha gives us some basic principles on how to decide what should and shouldn't be done so that we become more and more independent in the teaching.

What he's doing is pointing out possibilities that we may not have known about otherwise. On the one hand, the possibility of training the mind to put an end to suffering: That's on the good side. It is possible. Human beings have this power within them. However, there are other possibilities that are a lot less skillful that you might not anticipate.

I remember watching Ajaan Fuang teach. People would be meditating and he would talk to them as they were meditating, basically pointing out what to do. I think he could read their minds and figure out what they were doing, so he would say, "Don't focus there, focus here." If something came up, he would tell them whether to pay attention to it or not. And listening to him teach and seeing all the many different problems that people could come up with, I began to realize that the human mind is extremely creative in creating problems for itself, sometimes based on old ideas we have from the past, sometimes based on something new that comes up and we're overwhelmed by it. People who have visions particularly have

a lot of dangers in their practice, because they tend to believe the visions, which come with a lot of force, especially when they come up in the mind that's really quiet. They seem to be welling up from some deep part of the mind. Well, they may be coming from a deep part of the mind, but not every deep part of the mind is reliable. There are also some deep delusions in the mind.

So it's good to have some advice on what dangers to watch out for and what possibilities to look for. This is why we study. If we had a simple method that simply said, "Well just note, note, note, note, note whatever comes up, and you don't have to think about anything, and that'll take you to awakening," you wouldn't have to study anything. But you're making choices: where to focus the mind, what to do, and how to interpret what things mean. This is the nature of the mind. It's always looking for meanings, thinking it can give us some guidance in what to do, for instance, so that the mind can settle down and get to really deep states of concentration, where the sense of the body begins to fall away and you're left just with infinite space or infinite awareness.

Some people start interpreting that infinite awareness as the basis of all reality, a kind of ground of being, and from that ground of being, things arise and pass away, but the ground of being doesn't seem to be affected by it. That's where they come up with weird ideas about how good and evil don't really exist, because, after all, both good and evil things come up in this awareness and they don't seem to affect it. They get the idea that as you get awakened, you're beyond good and evil. But as the Buddha said, it's very clear: One of the signs of an awakened person is that he or she would never, consciously or intentionally, break the five precepts. Awakened people are not defined by the five precepts. They don't define a sense of who they are out of the precepts, but virtue becomes a natural part of the mind. So when you hit a state like that, you have to remember what the Buddha said about the fabrications of the mind.

We can create different states out of the way we breathe. We can create them out of the different perceptions we have. So what is the perception that's holding you in those states? Look at that action and the perception and you begin to see that that action is inconstant. And so this awareness that you're holding onto is basically inconstant, too. The inconstancy may be very subtle, but it's there. So the Buddha's warning you: Look for this. Watch out for this, because it's one of the big dangers in meditation.

You hit something that seems to be an experience of awakening, but it's not. But you can come up to all kinds of conclusions that get in the way of the real practice. So the purpose of study, the purpose of listening is to alert you to possibilities of good things that you can do and of mistakes you can make. And in

doing that, the Buddha said, the teacher provides protection. Now, he can't protect you from all your mistakes, but he can give you some ideas about where to look, where not to look, what to do, what not to do so that you can become self-reliant.

There's a passage in Ajaan Maha Boowa's teachings where he talks about the death of Ajaan Mun and his sense of really feeling lost. Here he was, losing the teacher he'd depended on for so many years and there was nobody else who could explain things that would seem to be as just right for him as Ajaan Mun's explanations. But then he stopped to think: Hadn't Ajaan Mun been teaching him certain things all the way along? Shouldn't he take those teachings as his teacher from this point on? And one of the teachings that he said was most reliable was that if anything unusual comes up in the meditation and you're not sure what it is, just go with your sense of being aware without jumping to any conclusions. Just be aware of the thing, not saying whether it's good or bad. Just watch it. See how it comes, see how it goes. Then when it's gone, you're safe.

So that's what the Buddha gives you: some basic advice that you can then use as a standard for judging what should and shouldn't be done. This is why we study, because these principles can be put into practice. Then you find for yourself as you test them that they do give reliable advice. But the Buddha does encourage you to test. He's not one of those teachers who says, "Just believe me and don't think." He says, "Take this on. Try it. But make sure that you've developed the qualities of the mind that make you a reliable judge: qualities of alertness, mindfulness, concentration, discernment."

So that's what we're doing as we're sitting here right now: trying to develop our mindfulness and alertness and concentration and discernment so that we can become reliable judges as to what should and shouldn't be done, and which results of our actions are satisfactory and which ones are not. Just make sure that you hold yourself to a high standard, because the possibilities are high as well: the total end of suffering. There are dangers in the path. Watch out for those. But do your best to internalize and develop the qualities of being a good judge. That way you'll be able to come across a course of action that really is reliable and gets results that are really worth wanting.