

Honest & Observant

January 23, 2020

When the Buddha set out the basic requirements that he was looking for in a student, he didn't say that you had to have a PhD in Buddhist studies, or a Bachelors, or even a fourth grade education. He looked for two qualities: one, that you be observant; and two, that you be honest and no deceiver. That's because the course of study he's going to give you is one in which you have to learn from your mistakes, and those are the two qualities you're going to need to learn in that way. You have to be observant to watch your actions and look at the results. And you have to be honest when the results don't come out well. These are the qualities he trained his son in.

You know the story: The Buddha came to see Rahula when he was seven years old, when Rahula ordained as a novice. Rahula sees him coming, sets out some water for the Buddha to wash his feet. The Buddha takes the dipper, uses the water, and then leaves a little bit of water in the dipper. Then he asks Rahula, "Do you see how little water there is in this dipper?" "Yes." "That's how little goodness there is in someone who tells a deliberate lie with no sense of shame." Then he throws the water away and says, "That's what happens to the goodness of someone who tells a deliberate lie with no sense of shame. It gets thrown away like that." Then he shows him how empty the dipper is. "That's how empty of goodness you are if you tell a deliberate lie with no sense of shame." So he's stressing the principle of honesty and truthfulness.

The rest of the instruction is on how to be observant.

First you look at your intentions before you act. What kind of results do you expect out of the action? And if you expect harm or oppression or affliction, you don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, you go ahead and do it. But then you watch the results as you're acting, and if any affliction is coming up, either for yourself or for others, you stop. If you don't see any affliction, you keep on going. When the action is done, you look at the long-term results. Here again, the principle of honesty has to come in. What were the results? If they did cause affliction, you go and talk it over with someone else who's more advanced on the path to get some ideas on how not to repeat the mistake. And then you make up your mind you're not going to repeat it again.

There's another place where the Buddha advises, when you realize you've done something wrong, that you make up your mind not to repeat the mistake, and then you spread goodwill: goodwill for yourself so that you don't beat yourself up

too much, goodwill for the person you harmed, and goodwill for everybody else so as to make sure your motivation stays strong for the next time you have to really think about an action, what you're going to do.

But if you look back on your action and see that there was no harm, you should take joy in that fact and keep on training. This is one of the places where we look for joy in our practice, realizing that we really are able to train our actions so that they're less and less harmful. That, too, gives us sustenance for the next time we have to make a decision on how to act.

So when you're pondering your actions, this is what you ponder: actions right here, right now, in light of the lessons you've learned in the past. There's that passage where the Buddha says that the results of kamma are inconceivable. But what he's talking about is long-term results on into future lives—how they will combine with the results of other actions. This observation also applies to the question of when somebody dies in this lifetime, say, of a strange accident. Why did that person die? You don't exactly know. You know the basic principle but you can't trace out the details. If you tried to trace out the details, you'd go crazy. It's because kamma is so complex in it's working out.

Just think about how many times you have to make a decision in the course of the day. You make lots of decisions. Some are skillful; some are not. Some are like seeds that give their results in a day or two. Others are seeds that give their results over long periods of time. And the seeds get all planted together in a way where some can squeeze others out. So it's futile to try to trace down the causes for why a particular incident happens. But you take as your working hypothesis that you do have choices and that the quality of the action and its results is going to depend on the intention as informed by actions you've done in the past.

Underlying all this is the quality of goodwill for yourself and for others, and the sense of heedfulness that comes from that goodwill—that you don't want to harm yourself and you don't want to harm others, because there will be bad consequences if you do. Lots of good qualities are brought together this way, and it's in this way that you learn how to protect yourself from bad kamma, both from doing bad kamma now and on into the future, and also from the results of bad kamma in the past.

As you get more skillful in the present, you develop that quality of goodwill more and more. It's one of the qualities the Buddha recommends that you make unlimited. And as he says, when your mind is unlimited, then the results of past bad actions will be much more limited in comparison so they won't have such a big an impact. It's like a fine for stealing a goat. If you're wealthy, the fine hardly matters to you at all. If you're poor and you can't pay it, they throw you into jail.

So we're amassing our wealth here. But amassing the wealth is not enough.

In that practice that the Buddha taught to Rahula, the principle of looking at your actions and learning from your mistakes applies to the meditation as well. And it's through the meditation that you develop the other skills that are going to protect you from the results of your past kamma.

There's another passage where the Buddha's teaching Rahula how to meditate. He starts off by saying, "Make your mind like earth. In the same way that the earth doesn't react when foul things are thrown on it, you don't want to react when unpleasant things happen." What this means is you want to have the mind in a position where it is fair and unshaken in looking at the results of its actions. That way, if you see that you've made a mistake, you don't run away from it. And if you've done something well, you don't get too carried away. You want to take a very matter-of-fact attitude toward the principle of action so that you can learn from it.

But you don't just stay there like a clod of dirt. The Buddha does recommend that, from that point, you start working with breath meditation. And it's all very proactive: breathing in and out aware of the whole body, breathing in and out calming the effect of the breath on the body, breathing in and out in a way that gives rise to rapture, that gives rise to pleasure. There's a lot of proactive decision-making and choices and learning from what you're doing.

And how do you breathe in a way that gives rise to ease and rapture? How do you breathe in a way that calms the effect of the breath on your body? How do you breathe in a way that gladdens the mind? These are things you have to learn for yourself. You can get pointers from other people, but your mind is your mind, your breath is your breath. You have to learn how to put them together.

And you have to observe so that when the pleasure comes up, you know how to handle it. As the Buddha said, you let it spread throughout the body. And once it's spread throughout the body, you try to develop an awareness that fills the body and is not affected by the sense of pleasure. It knows it's there, but it doesn't go wallowing in it. This is one of the other prerequisites for not being overcome by past bad kamma—that you don't let the mind be overcome by pleasure—and this is how you learn that skill.

You give the mind a skillful pleasure like this and you learn how to develop the right attitude toward it. When pleasure comes, we usually try to gobble it down, and that's that. But if you realize when the pleasure is there and you don't try to gobble it down, it'll stay there with the body and do its work. Have some trust in the pleasure. Have some trust in the principle of cause and effect. This is how you

learn how not to be overcome by pleasure. At the same time, you learn some discernment, which is another one of the qualities that you're going to need.

As for not being overcome by pain, which is another one of the qualities you're going to need to protect you from past bad kamma, you're going to run into pains as you meditate and you have to learn not to be scared off by them. Working with the breath is one of the ways that you give yourself a range of tools to use with the pain so that you're not cowed by it, you're not afraid of it. You know there are ways of breathing through the pain, breathing around the pain. You can focus your attention on another part of the body. If there's a pain, say, in your knee, you can focus on your other knee. Or if both knees are in pain, you can focus in your chest around the heart. Try to find some part of the body that's not in pain. As Ajaan Lee once said, if everything in the body were in pain, you'd die. There's got to be some part that's not. Find that, take up residence there, and learn how to not get worked up about the pain.

Once you've got a sense of pleasure, then you can use that. Ajaan Lee compares it to having lots of good friends who can drive all the gangsters out of your body. In other words, the more the pleasure develops, the more it can envelop the pain and dissolve it away—or at the very least, put the mind in a position where it feels comfortable where it is, fine where it is. If the pain is going to be there, it can be there. But you don't have to feel threatened by it because you're not trying to gobble it down. The mind can be at its ease, settled in. That's another one of the skills you're going to need to protect yourself from past bad kamma, which is concentration.

So you've got the virtue of truthfulness, concentration, discernment, the ability not to be overcome by pleasure, not to be overcome by pain, and that unlimited attitude of goodwill for everybody. These are the qualities that will protect you from doing unskillful things in the future, and protect you from a large part of the results of past bad actions, so the mind doesn't have to suffer from them. Even if the body gets afflicted in one way or another, the mind doesn't have to suffer.

And these are the skills you learn by learning from your mistakes. After all, this was how the Buddha learned. He didn't have a teacher. He had a couple of teachers, but they taught him only part of the path. There was a lot he had to learn on his own. And this is how he did it. He did things and then he looked at the results. If he didn't like the results, he'd change what he was doing. And it came down to his being observant and honest. He realized that those were the qualities that had seen him through, so those were the qualities he would look for in a student. And those are the qualities we can develop.

So you do your best to be honest and observant as you go through the day and as you meditate. If you're going to ponder kamma, this is what you ponder: what you're doing right now, and the results of what you're doing right now. The skills you're going to develop in order to do this well will send their results back to protect you from the past and forward to protect you in the future. So these are skills that will protect you all around.