

## *Study to Practice*

*April 18, 2020*

When people have a lot of free time, they tend to spend it watching their screens, their portals to the world. Taking in a lot of information... and misinformation. You have to keep asking yourself when it comes in, “These people who are telling me this, why do they want me to believe this?” Because there’s no guarantee that the information that’s coming in is going to be true or useful or timely. In a lot of cases, the people who provide it call it *content*, in other words, taking no responsibility for the quality. It could be shredded newspapers; it could be gray fluff like the stuffing in stuffed toys. That’s all they guarantee: It’s content.

As long as you have the time and you’ve been meditating, it’s good to take some time to study the Dhamma, to take in something of substance, something you can rely on. Something you know is true and beneficial *and* timely.

The Buddha said that when you study, it’s like the weapons of soldiers defending a fortress. You have the tools you need in order to deal with the enemies—i.e. unskillful mental qualities, unskillful emotions—as they arise.

Several years back, I was invited to a Dhamma center up in Vancouver. They’d asked me to talk about why it’s necessary to study. For them, the question came from the fact that they had heard that mindfulness was simply accepting whatever comes up and being non-reactive, and what do you need to study in order to do that?

I pointed out first that that’s not what mindfulness is. As the Buddha said, there’s a *lot* to mindfulness. He said that if he lived for a hundred years and people were to ask him questions about mindfulness for that entire hundred years—aside from time for sleeping and time for eating, defecating—at the end of the hundred years he still wouldn’t have come to the end of the questions about mindfulness. It’s *that* big a topic.

And you look at the basic formula: It’s not just accepting, accepting. Mindfulness is keeping something in mind. For instance, when you’re keeping the breath in mind, that’s body in and of itself. You’re ardent, you’re alert, you’re mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. There’s a lot to discuss there. How do you stay with the body in and of itself? How do you stay with the breath in and of itself? When greed and distress with reference to the world come up, how do you deal with them? And what’s the skillful way to be alert? To be ardent? What’s the skillful way to be mindful? After all, there are lots of things you could keep in mind. You want to have your memories of what works and what doesn’t work in the practice at your fingertips but you don’t have keep running them through your mind all the time.

As for alertness, you’re not just alert to whatever. You’re alert to what you’re doing. You’re alert to the results that come from your actions.

And then you're ardent, and here's a huge field right here. Even the people who teach mindfulness as acceptance—or meditation as not doing anything—will admit, when you pin them down, that when unskillful states come up, you have to work with them. And it's precisely here that studying the Dhamma is really useful, because it gives you tools to work with them.

For instance, remember the Buddha's way of dealing with anything unskillful that comes up. There are five steps. The first two have to do with establishing the fact that they are fabrications. In other words, you see things arising and you look for the origination, what's causing them. You see things passing away and you ask yourself: When they pass away, what passes away with them? Why do they come? Why do they go? When you see that they're fabricated like this, coming and going, it gives you a sense that you can change them. You're not stuck with an emotion. You don't simply say, "Well, that's what's there in the present moment, so I have to accept it." If it's going to lead you to do unskillful things or it's going to create unskillful habits in the mind, you've *got* to get rid of it. Now this may take some time, watching it, but you watch it for the purpose of getting past it.

This is where the Buddha's teachings on the three fabrications come in useful. You look at the way you're breathing. Say anger comes up: How are you breathing around the anger? That's bodily fabrication. Then there's verbal fabrication: How are you talking to yourself around what's got you angry? The technical terms are directed thought and evaluation: Where are you directing your thoughts? What are your standards of evaluating? What's worth thinking? What's not worth thinking? How to think? How not to think?

Then there's mental fabrication: perceptions and feelings. What are the perceptions that aggravate the anger? What perceptions might help put the anger aside? The same with the feelings: What kind of feelings are you focusing on?

The Buddha gives *lots* of recommendations for how to deal with these three kinds of fabrication. He tells you even how to breathe: Breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture, breathe aware of the whole body, breathe in a way that calms the breath. It makes you sensitive to the different kinds of fabrication, so that you can figure out: When the mind is sluggish, what do you do to gladden it? When the mind is scattered, what do you do to steady it? When the mind is burdened with anger, what do you do to release it?

He gives you ways to think: That's verbal fabrication, different ways of thinking about anger—like his statement that there's only one thing whose killing he approves of is the killing of anger.

And he recommends skillful feelings and perceptions. How do you perceive your relationship to the person you're angry about, or the situation you're angry about? Can you perceive it in a different way, where it's not oppressive? How can you muster some goodwill to bring to the situation? Try holding in mind the perception that your goodwill is as large as the Earth: People can spit on the Earth and urinate on the Earth, dig around in the Earth, trying to

destroy it, but the Earth is just too big. Your goodwill is as large as the River Ganges: People can bring a torch to try to burn up the River Ganges, but water doesn't burn. Your goodwill is like space: People can try to write in the space, but there's nothing there to receive their writing. In other words, people can say things but you're not presenting them with a little chalkboard on which to write their aggravating statements, so the statements just float away in the space. These perceptions are *really* helpful.

And then as for feelings: The Buddha says don't just stick around with feelings of the flesh. Try to create some feelings *not* of the flesh. Even pain not of the flesh is better than the pursuit of pleasures of the flesh. Pain not of the flesh means realizing there's a goal that others have attained that you haven't attained, but it could be attained if you put some work into it. There's a pain there: There's work to be done. But that pain inspires you, motivates you, rather than simply having you turn around and around and around, searching for pleasure and running into pain, holding onto a pleasure until it turns into a pain. Pain *not* of the flesh provides you with a way out, through which you can create pleasures not of the flesh, i.e. the pleasures that come from concentration.

So when you study, you get lots of recommendations for how to take apart unskillful emotions and how to fabricate skillful emotions in their stead. And those are just the first two steps in the Buddha's five-step program, the ones that establish the truth of the fact that things are being fabricated in the mind, and give you a beginning sense that some fabrications are better than others.

This gets carried through with the next steps. You look for the allure of those fabrications, you look for their drawbacks. The allure is why you go for them: These things arise and they pass away but sometimes you dig them up again. If they're skillful fabrications, that's one thing. But when they're unskillful, why are you digging them up? What's the allure? What does the mind think it's getting out of them? How is it feeding on these things? You have to look carefully, because the mind tends to lie to itself about where it's actually feeding.

One way of getting to know is by insisting on the drawbacks of those fabrications until part of the mind objects. When it objects, then you know, okay, it's protecting something, and you can dig further in. When you finally see what the real allure is, and that it's no match for the drawbacks, that's when you gain the escape. That's the fifth step: You develop dispassion for that particular state and you can let it go, and you're freed from it.

And as the Buddha points out, you apply these five steps first to unskillful thoughts, unskillful fabrications, and then you apply the same process to skillful ones. As he says, with the five faculties: You look for their origination, you look for their disappearance, you look for the allure, their drawbacks, and the escape—*even from them*. That's an advanced stage, but this five-stage program is something you learn from reading, you learn from studying.

And then you can put it to use, because that's what all the teachings are for, they're *meant* to be used. This is why the Buddha always pairs the word *Dhamma* with *attha*, the meaning,

the goal, the purpose of the Dhamma. You need to know both. In other words, when you read about a particular teaching, you want to know: What is it for? Then you apply it to that use. And when you finally reach the goal, that's when you *really* know the meaning.

I read the work of a scholar who said that those three fabrications apply only to the mind in concentration, whereas there's another version of three fabrications that apply to rebirth, and they're not connected. But why should they not be connected? The mind that meditates is the same mind that goes for rebirth; it's the same mind that creates unskillful thoughts right now. You can learn how to deal with your unskillful thoughts right now after having learned about these three kinds of fabrication and become sensitive to them in your actual practice of concentration. You gain insight into how it is that the mind goes for rebirth again and again. There's an allure to being reborn. You know there are lots of drawbacks, and at that moment of death we have to learn how to take apart all the things that are going to tempt us to be reborn in really unskillful places.

So this method of analysis is applicable all across the board. It has *lots* of ramifications. If you didn't learn how to overcome rebirth through the meditation, where would you learn how to overcome it?

So this is how you work through an unskillful thought, unskillful emotion. And the Buddha's there to provide you with all kinds of tools, all kinds of weapons. If you don't study, you're like soldiers without weapons. The enemy comes and you have nothing with which to fight but your bare hands. But when you do have the weapons, though, you can protect your fortress, and no matter what comes from which direction, you can guarantee yourself that you'll come out safe.