

From Compunction to Release

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To understand some of the finer points of the Dhamma, especially in the more advanced stages of meditation, it's often good to go back and look at the basics. Take the teaching on compunction, *ottappa*. It's basically an unwillingness to do something unskillful because you're afraid of the consequences. It's usually paired with *hiri*, a healthy sense of shame—the shame where you're concerned about looking bad in the eyes of people you respect. Compunction it's more impersonal. You realize that, given the way things are, if you act on unskillful motives with unskillful intentions, there's going to be harm down the line, and you decide that you care. You want to avoid that harm.

Right there you're combining two principles of discernment. One of them is right view, the view that actions do have consequences and that the consequences are based on the quality of the intention underlying them. Then there's right resolve, which is the desire not to be harmful. It's a very basic emotion. You see somebody you'd like to hit, and you realize that if you hit them, there would be consequences.

The Buddha would teach this principle to children. There are stories where he's on his alms round and he sees some children, in one case, beating a snake with a stick, in another case, catching fish. He says to them, "Do you hate pain, do you love pleasure?" And they said, "Yes." "Then why are you causing pain to other beings? The karma that's going to come back at you, even as you run away." In other words, no matter how hard you may try to get away from it, it'll track you down.

A very basic emotion, a very basic principle of karma in the Dhamma—but it carries us all the way through, because it basically says that you do care about the consequences of your action.

Somehow the teaching that you should act without being attached to the outcome is presented as one of the Buddha's principles, but I've never seen him say that anywhere. Now, there are cases where you have to be equanimous about efforts you're putting put in and that are not getting results yet. But the whole teaching revolves around the attitude that you're acting because you want certain results. You realize that some actions lead to better results than others, and it would be foolish to act in ways that you know are going to give rise to pain.

It's simply not worth it.

This is a value judgment. Here again, you hear some strange teachings that insight has nothing to do with value judgments at all—in fact it's supposed to be the opposite of a value judgment. You just accept everything, the idea being that by not trying to make anything happen, you're going to run into the unfabricated. But again, the Buddha never taught that.

There are actions that are worth developing and actions that are worth abandoning. That's a value judgment. The four noble truths are a value judgment. You act on craving, there's going to be suffering, so craving is something you should abandon. If you act on the noble eightfold path, you'll reach the end of suffering, so the path is something you should develop. The path is obviously better than craving.

Now, it's easy to understand that in the abstract, but a lot of the practice is learning how to apply that principle in action.

As we're meditating, we are fabricating a state of becoming. You're doing an action and you've decided it's worth it. That decision is based on an understanding of karma, fabrication, and a value judgment: that the effort that goes into sitting here looking at the breath night, after night, after night is effort well repaid.

The rewards may not be coming right away, but you're convinced in the principle that if you train the mind, you'll be much less likely to cause yourself suffering. So here you are, training the mind. And you're training it in a way that tries to give rise to a sense of well-being. When you find that you can breathe in ways and focus your breath in ways that do give rise to a sense of well-being, you have a new standard for pleasure.

As the Buddha said, most people see no other alternative to pain besides sensual pleasure. So in spite of the drawbacks of sensual pleasures, they keep going back. Whereas when you do concentration, you have an alternative pleasure. It's called the pleasure of form. And the Buddha encourages you to indulge in it, settle in, gain nourishment from it. In other words, he's basically saying to get attached, get good at this, so that it becomes something you can actually hold on to—because it gives you another perspective on your old pleasures. You're more willing to see their drawbacks. This is how dispassion comes about.

The Buddha first teaches you dispassion for unskillful actions by talking about the rewards of generosity, the rewards of virtue, and also the opposite of rewards that come when you act on unskillful intentions. But the rewards of generosity, the rewards of virtue are what? Rebirth in the sensual heavens. Then you get into concentration and you can look back at the pleasures

of the sensual heavens. Even the sensual heavens have their drawbacks.

You've got something better here, and when you make that value judgment, it's based on an understanding of action: that you fabricate your pleasures. So why fabricate pleasures that have a lot of drawbacks? Here's one that has a lot less.

So you're showing goodwill for yourself, a desire to be harmless—in other words, right view and right resolve in action. Then you apply the same principle as your mind gets deeper and deeper into concentration. You learn to appreciate the deeper states of concentration. You compare them with the shallower ones and you see that the deeper ones are a much more worthwhile, a more satisfying place to be. Even though some of the deeper ones don't have the bells and whistles of rapture or pleasure, they're more equanimous, but still, over time you begin to realize they're better places to be.

Yet even they are fabricated. When you can develop some dispassion for them, not so that you would go back to your old ways, but to find something even better, that's how concentration can lead to the insight that leads to release. Even the insights, though, are an activity, and a part of insight is going to be that once you've used the insights that pry you away from your attachment to concentration, you have to let go of your attachment to the insights as well, because they, too, are activities. You're finally getting to something that's not an activity.

Ajaan Mun talks about this. He describes nibbana as activityless-ness, *akiriya* in Thai. But you don't get there by doing nothing, or trying to do nothing. You get there by getting more and more appreciative of the principle of action, developing more refined standards for your judgment as to what's worth doing, what's not, based on the insight that you do fabricate your experience anyhow, so try to do it well. Do it in a way that's rewarding, where the effort that goes into it is well repaid.

So you start with something simple and basic like compunction and you find that once you understand the basic principles, they carry you all the way through. If you miss the basic principles, the teachings on more abstract issues can lead you astray. So don't look down on the basics.

Ajaan Lee often said that a lot of people who study the Dhamma get things backwards. They think high-level Dhamma is low, and low-level Dhamma is high. High-level Dhamma, he says, is the Dhamma that you put into practice, starting with the virtues you develop like shame and compunction. Low-level Dhamma is the Dhamma that you've just memorized. It's a guide, but

the actual high-level Dhamma comes with the practice.

It's like the difference between a recipe and the food you make based on the recipe. You can't eat the recipe. What you do based on the recipe is what actually gives you nourishment.

So look at your actions. Start from the basics. Look at the little ways in which you give in to unskillful mind states. Remind yourself that if you can't take care of those, how are you going to be able to manage the more advanced levels? But if you *do* master your impulses to do something unskillful—if you have a sense of compunction around them—that opens the way.