

## *Instruct, Urge, Rouse, & Encourage Yourself*

*September 10, 2020*

The Buddha says that when you listen to a Dhamma talk, you shouldn't have contempt for the speaker, you shouldn't have contempt for the Dhamma that's being taught. That much you might expect. After all, if you look down on the speaker, it may happen that the speaker has something good to say, at least one or two sentences out of the talk, but you miss them if you have contempt. So you make yourself open. See what good might be here.

What's really interesting is where he says not to have contempt for yourself. In other words, don't look down on your abilities, don't tell yourself, "This is something I can't do." The Buddha teaches the Dhamma step by step, and it's always good to take the next step if you can, or at the very least to solidify yourself in the step where you are.

This is an important aspect of your sense of self as you practice. We know the Buddha says that ultimately we'll get beyond any assumptions about self, but that's when we don't need them. In the meantime, though, the perception of self and the perception of not-self are both strategies for happiness. You need them to get where you want to go. You try to figure out which desires you can identify as worth following, and which ones are not worth following. You establish a sense of priorities. That's a healthy sense of self together a healthy sense of not-self. In other words, the desires that come low on the list, you can put aside. You say, "I don't have to identify with those right now."

I read one time of a Navy general who every day would make a list of the ten most important things that needed to be done. Then she would strike out everything except for one and two, and she'd focus just on those. That's how she got things done.

So in this case, the practice of meditation is something you want to identify with at the moment. Everything else, you strike out.

And the parts of the mind that say, "Ah, you're not up to this, you can't do this," strike those out, too. After all, which part of the mind doesn't want you to practice? It's the part siding with the defilements, siding with the idea of going back to your old ways. But we all come here because we realize that our old ways of doing things are not satisfactory. We want something better.

So always encourage yourself. Think of the way the Buddha would give a Dhamma talk: He would instruct, urge, rouse, and encourage his audience. Notice that, out of those four verbs, three of them are there to encourage you—urge, rouse, encourage—to give you the confidence that, yes, you can do this, and it's worth doing.

So when you're talking to yourself as you meditate, there'll be some instruction, as you tell yourself, "Now do this, now do that." Then the urging that says, "Come on. Give it a try."

“Rouse” is to rouse your energy when it begins to flag. And of course, “encourage” keeps you at it, again and again, convincing you that you can do it—and that it’s worth doing.

When you have confidence that you can do this, that’s a healthy sense of self. You notice that the Buddha doesn’t give you a very elaborate sense of self to hold on to in the course of the path: simply that you can do this, you’re capable of doing it, and you’ll benefit—and if you don’t do this, nobody else will be able to do it for you, and you’re going to suffer. That’s the only self you really need to develop as you practice, because you’re going to be focusing on your actions, so a self that’s responsible, a self that’s capable, a self that’s going to benefit from the actions: That’s all you need.

And give a *lot* of attention to the Buddha’s shoulds. You *should* try to comprehend suffering, you *should* try to abandon its cause, you *should* try to realize the cessation of suffering by doing what you really should do, which is to develop the path. That’s where you want to urge, rouse, and encourage yourself. Now again, the Buddha sets out those shoulds not to impose them on you. He simply says that if you want to put an end to suffering, these are the things you should do, because this is the way things are. This is how cause and effect function. That’s a set of views.

We all know the four forms of clinging: sensuality, views, habits and practices, and a sense of self. There’s no room for sensuality clinging in the path. But you need right views about the nature of action, and again, that’s where the Buddha gets into a lot of detail: the nature of action. Views about other things, he puts aside: “Is the world eternal? Is it not eternal? Finite? Infinite?” Issues that consume other people, he says, “Don’t even bother. Don’t go there.”

All you need to know is that craving and clinging, if you hold on to them, lead to more rebirth. And the quality of your actions will determine the type of rebirth. But there’s also a path of action that can get you beyond rebirth. So: karma, rebirth, which both are teachings about action and the power of action.

The Buddha does set out a sketch of the universe: These are the different places you could go, but they’re all related to karma. Some of the levels of heaven, for example, are related to different stages of concentration, skills you can master. His design of the universe is not like what anybody else had designed at that time. Of course, he didn’t design it, he didn’t think it up, he just discovered that, through action, this is what you can experience. He’s often been accused of simply adopting the worldview of his culture, but that’s not true. You look into the Upanisads and you can see they had different views of the world, of the levels of the cosmos. You look into the Jain teachings of the time, and they had a different view of the levels of the cosmos, too.

So the Buddha’s teachings about where action can lead to were distinctive. And they’re all you need to know in terms of views about the world. That and the fact that there is causality and that you have a role in the present moment where you can shape things. The present is not entirely shaped by the past.

These are the views you hold on to as you follow the path. They're not much, but they're there to focus your attention on what you're doing, instructing you as to what's skillful and what's not, urging you to do what's skillful, rousing your energy with thoughts of what's going to happen to you if you don't develop skillful actions, and then encouraging you to stick with it, stick with it. That's what the teachings provide, and that's what you should provide for yourself.

We shape our experience through our intentions. We shape our sense of the body through the way we breathe; we shape our speech through directed thought and evaluation; we shape our mind through our perceptions and feelings. When you look in the Buddha's teachings or the teachings of the ajaans, you find that they're giving you examples of how to shape your mental speech, how to shape your mind to keep it on the path. So the examples are all set out, but they don't stop with the examples. The Buddha urges you, rouses you, encourages you: "This is a good path," he said.

That covers both sides of discernment: your understanding of how things work, and your desire to use that understanding for a good purpose. Right view basically tells you the way things are, how they work. Right resolve says that it's good to act on this. Which is why Ajaan Lee pointed out that when the Buddha talks about the three qualities that are brought to mindfulness practice—and by extension to concentration practice—mindfulness, ardency, alertness: Ardency is the wisdom faculty.

The way the Buddha defines mindfulness, you could be mindful of anything; you could hold anything in mind. Simply being able to remember things that were done and said a long time ago: That's how he defines mindfulness. Nothing about giving priority to what's skillful or putting aside what's unskillful. The same with alertness: You're alert to what you're doing. It could be skillful, it could be not skillful, but you're alert to it regardless.

The question of skillfulness comes in with the ardency, realizing that if you act on unskillful intentions, there's going to be suffering. So you're ardent in your effort to abandon what's unskillful and to develop what's skillful in its place. That's the wisdom, that's the discernment in those three faculties. It's what takes mindfulness and turns it into right mindfulness, what takes alertness and turns it into right alertness.

So you don't want to stop with knowing the Dhamma or listening to instructions. You want to be able to urge, rouse, and encourage yourself so that you gain the benefit from the Dhamma. The Dhamma's like a recipe book: You can look at the book for hours and not get full. There are a lot of pictures in the book and just looking at them can actually make you more hungry. But if you follow the recipe and eat what you've made, then you get full. That's when you realize the worth of that recipe.

So keep encouraging yourself in the path. Don't look down on yourself, telling yourself you can't do it. Many, many people have fallen by the wayside in the past by thinking that. But then, what is that? It's just your defilements damaging yourself, destroying yourself, destroying

your potential. The fact that you're here meditating means you've got *some* good to you. Don't let it go to waste.