

Honest & Observant

October 6, 2020

There was one time when the Buddha asked Ven. Sariputta, “Are you convinced that the five faculties lead to the deathless?” And Sariputta said, “No, I’m not convinced. I know.”

Which means, of course, that when you’re working from conviction, it’s because you don’t know. But this is where we all have to start out: We all start from ignorance. The Buddha himself, before he gained his awakening, was starting from ignorance, but he figured out how to come to knowledge. That’s what he’s trying to teach us: how to come from ignorance to knowledge.

As he said, he looked for two qualities in a student: One was that the student be observant, and the other that he be honest and no deceiver. Always keep those two qualities in mind as you practice.

Being observant: What does that mean? It means you’re inquisitive. You look for things that are *not* pointed out to you. You try to figure things out on your own.

The Buddha focuses you first on your own actions. The instructions he gives to Rahula about examining your actions before, during, and after you do them are basically instructions on how to be observant and honest, and where to focus your powers of observation. They also focus you on where it’s especially important that you be honest with yourself: one, in terms of the intentions behind your actions, and two, in terms of the results of your actions.

When we’re meditating, we’re focusing on the source of our actions. Always remember that meditation is about action. Sometimes we’re told that it’s not a matter of doing anything, it’s simply being. But as the Buddha discovered, our being is becoming, and becoming is a kind of doing. You want to be sensitive to that all the time.

As you meditate, you’re trying to develop three qualities around your actions that lead to knowledge: You’re mindful, ardent, and alert—alert to watch what you’re doing; and mindful to remember what you’ve learned from what you’ve done. That’s an important part of knowledge. We’re not here just to be aware of the present moment and nothing else. We’re looking for patterns—patterns in our behavior that are unskillful—and for ways in which we can change our behavior so it’s more skillful. For that, you have to look at your actions over time and try to do them well, which is why there’s the ardeny in there.

There's a strange passage in the Commentary, where it tries to argue that alertness doesn't mean simply being aware of what you're doing while you're doing it. It says that even jackals are aware of what they're doing; even a baby sucking at its mother's breast is aware of what it's doing. But how continually are jackals aware? How continually are even adult human beings aware? They're focused here and then they're someplace else, then someplace else, then they may come back here a little bit, and then they go off someplace else again. How are you going to learn anything about your actions and their results if you're jumping around like that all the time? How are you going to see patterns unless you can remember things? So you're ardent to develop this quality of consistent alertness and ready mindfulness, focused again on what you're doing.

Those are the qualities that will enable you to see. When the Buddha's teaching us the path to the end of suffering, there's nothing about it that's far away. It's all about what we're doing right now, close up. And he's moving us from ignorance to knowledge by telling us to be more alert to what we're doing. So be more mindful; be more ardent. These are good qualities to have in mind in any case. Even if it turned out that the Buddha was wrong, the fact that you'd worked on these qualities as you meditated would stand you in good stead, whatever other tasks you wanted to do.

So give yourself to these qualities. Give yourself to these actions. The path in which we have conviction is a good path. As the Buddha said, it's admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end. You start out with good practices, you maintain them, and they all lead to a good place.

Now, that good place at the moment is something unknown to most of us, but you can look at the beginnings and see that they're good. The Buddha teaches you to be generous and to reflect on your generosity. The same with virtue: You follow the precepts and reflect on what it means to follow the precepts. This quality of being reflective: That's where you're going to learn.

When you're being generous, watch the mind to see what its motivation is, to see the parts of the mind that would argue against being generous, that would want to hold on to something even after you'd given it away. Then see if you can train them to think more skillfully.

You begin to see the power of your actions to shape the present moment and the future. Your observation is not a passive one—in other words, simply registering what's happening. You're engaging in actions and observing the results of your actions. Then you act again and you observe the results of your actions again.

As you do that, you begin to see some of the forms of fabrication the Buddha talks about. You need to talk to yourself to be generous. You need to have a perception that it's something worthwhile. The same with virtue: You need to talk yourself into being virtuous. You need to see that it's worthwhile. As you develop perceptions around your precepts to value them, that makes them stronger.

The same principle holds you try to develop goodwill: You realize that it's not going to come naturally. We're not simply uncovering our innate nature as we start trying to spread goodwill to all beings. The Buddha never talks about innate nature, except for the fact that the mind is very changeable and it's capable of *all kinds* of things. That's a nature—if you want to call it a nature—that's very unfixated, which means we can direct it.

Again, we do that through verbal and mental fabrication: directed thought and evaluation, feelings and perceptions—with the realization that you have to be mindful around goodwill, you have to be determined on it. You make up your mind to have goodwill for everybody, and you hold that in mind. You don't slip in any ill will and then pretend it's not there. If you detect ill will, you've got to uproot it. Here again, you have to use directed thought and evaluation to remind yourself of *why* you have to do that, of what its advantages are.

As you engage in these acts of merit, you're beginning to see the mind in action. You're beginning to get a sense of what's skillful and what's not. Then you bring these qualities to bear as you focus on the breath or whatever else your meditation topic might be. Here again, it's this quality of being reflective: That's where the Buddha has you focus your powers of observation—on your actions, on your intentions, and on the results of your actions and intentions.

You're looking here at what you should know best. This is where the Commentary's really wrong. We're often so ignorant about our intentions and about our actions. If the results of our actions are unskillful, we cover them up as well. If you go through life like that, there's no way you're going to develop any kind of insight at all.

Here the Buddha's showing us how to examine ourselves. The image of a mirror appears again and again in the Dhamma. The Dhamma itself is a mirror; the practice is the act of holding a mirror up to yourself. You look into the mirror and if you see anything unskillful, the Buddha says, treat it as if someone who's fond of beauty looks in the mirror and sees a blemish, sees some dirt on his or her face. You wash it away. In doing this, you develop the qualities that enable you to know.

So this is how you go from ignorance to knowledge: You observe, you do, and then you observe and you do again.

It's like learning a language: Each of us has had to figure out the English language for him or herself. When you were a child, your parents couldn't drill a hole in your head, put a funnel there, and pour the words in. They would talk to you, and you would begin to pick up, bit by bit, what they were talking about. It began to make sense. You asked them sometimes what they meant, but then you were the one who had to ask the questions. You had to be observant. You learned grammar, how? By listening, and then repeating what you heard, and then working variations on it. Gradually, over time, you began to master the language.

Here you're trying to master the language of the heart, the language of the mind, for the purpose of putting an end to suffering. You do it in the same way that you learned your language: by being observant, by speaking the language, listening to the language, trying things out, and going from ignorance to knowledge.

It's the same with the meditation. The Buddha can't pour knowledge of nibbana into your head. If he could, he'd have had everybody line up, and that's how he would have spent his life. What he *was* able to do was to teach people how to learn for themselves, how to watch, how to figure things out, and how to become more and more trustworthy as observers. You do this by combining those two qualities together—honesty and being observant—so that the mind can put itself into a position where more and more it really can trust its judgment and develop some better and better sense of what's right, what's *just* right.

This is how Ven. Sariputta went from conviction to knowledge. And this is how we can, too.