

Focus on Your Skill

September 1, 2021

We're here to work on a skill. It was by focusing on this skill that the Buddha was able to avoid a lot of issues that would pull the mind off into wrong view no matter which side you took. There were a lot of questions that he wouldn't answer. "Is the world a oneness?" "Well, no," he said. "A multiplicity?" "Well, no." "Is there a self? Is there no self?" He wouldn't answer that one either because, as he saw, these were issues in which you make assumptions about what lies behind your experience. Those assumptions then will pull you away from what you're directly experiencing and the problem that can be solved right at what you're directly experiencing: the problem of suffering and stress. After all, the problem of suffering comes from what? It comes from your actions. So you want to focus on your actions. This was the insight he gained on the night of his awakening.

In his first knowledge, he saw that he had been reborn many, many times. And the question was: Is there a pattern behind that? One thing he did see was that in the course of rebirth, he'd taken many different identities, which indicated that one of the beliefs that was around at the time—that what you are in this lifetime is what you're going to be the next time around—was not true. He saw that your identity is not fixed.

But what *does* determine your identity? In the second knowledge, he looked into the question of how beings all over the universe pass away and come back to take birth. He saw that it was determined by their actions—actions throughout their lifetimes, and especially actions at the moment of death. So the question of "who" got put aside. Who was doing the action, who was receiving the action: Those questions also got put aside. He focused solely on the action in and of itself.

That was what was distinctive about what he did with his knowledge. Other people before him had seen beings dying and being reborn, and yet they'd come to a lot of wrong conclusions, because the big issue for them was, "What is it in you that takes rebirth? What is there of any essence inside you that goes from one life to the next, to the next, and stays the same despite the changes?"

But the Buddha's reasoning was that if action is what's causing things to happen, and present actions can make a difference, focus on your actions in the present, and not on the who or the what. That was how he came into the present moment in his third knowledge, to look at the present moment in terms of his actions, and just see it in terms of stress, the cause of stress, and what you could do

to put an end to stress. In other words, questions of becoming—in terms of identities and worlds of experience—got put to the side.

He focused on what he was doing. In one of his later suttas, he expanded on that. He said, “If you think about the past, and ask, “What was I? Did I exist? Did I not exist? If I did exist, what was I? How was I?” those are questions of inappropriate attention. Similarly with questions of the future: “Will I exist? Will I not exist? What will I be?” A lot of people, reading this passage, have asked, “But wasn’t that what the belief in karma and rebirth is all about?” Well, that is one way of looking at rebirth, but it’s not the way the Buddha recommended doing so.

For the Buddha, issues of rebirth had to do more with the process by which it happened—not who you were, or what you were, or what takes rebirth. The process comes through actions. That was the focus he brought into the present moment. Here again, he said that, in the present moment, questions of, “Do I exist? Do I not exist? Do I have a self? Do I not have a self?” Those get in the way. Instead, you focus simply on what’s happening: what you’re doing, what your intentions are, the various steps by which you do give rise to a sense of who you are in the world you’re in. But keep it at the processes. Keep it at what you’re doing. Focus on the issue of where’s the stress, what’s the cause, and how you can put an end to the cause. As for those other questions, you should put them all aside.

So in that sutta, he’s basically giving a picture of how he thought on the night of his awakening and addressed the options that were available to him. He could have thought about questions of, “Who am I? Where am I going? What will I be in the future?” But that would have not led to release. Release comes from looking at your actions in the present moment simply as actions—part of a pattern of cause and effect. That’s how you get the best Dhamma lesson out of the knowledge that you gain while you meditate.

I had a student one time who was quite psychic. She’d get visions about what the meaning of the world was, what the meaning of life was. I kept having to tell her, “Those are not the issues. The issues are: What are you doing right now? And in particular, what are you doing in the mind right now, because that’s where all the problems come from.”

Fortunately, the solution lies right here, too. As you see what’s giving rise to stress, you see that it’s not necessary. So you can let it go, let it go. You get more and more precise, more and more refined in your sensitivity to what’s happening.

So as you’re here looking at the breath, you’re looking in the right spot. Some people will say, “Looking at the breath? What about all these other big issues out there? What is your true identity, the ground of being, your true self?” You have

to keep remembering: The Buddha said those are non-issues. The real issue is right here: What are you doing right now? Because what you're doing right now is setting things in motion that can lead to more suffering if you're not careful. But if you focus on this issue of suffering or stress, then it cuts through a lot of those other big issues: the big abstractions that will pull you away.

So a large part of the practice is learning how to ask the right questions and pay attention at the right spot. Frame the issues in the right way. This is why the Buddha taught the four noble truths. That's the framework, and in that framework there's no mention of who's suffering or where in the world they're suffering. They point at something that's immediately present right here, right now. It's simply up to us not to slip off from right here, right now—which we do so easily, because the mind does like to think in terms of worlds in which you can find things that you want and things that you have the ability to find. In other words, you quickly take on becoming around your desires. All the narratives that go with that, worldviews that go with that just tie you down. Whereas if you look at the choices you're making right now, there's a possibility of liberation.

So try to stay focused right here. This is where the meditation becomes a balancing act, as with any craft or any skill. You try to get the mind quiet right here—so that it can see things clearly—but at the same time alert. All too often, when it gets quiet, it starts getting heedless. It's used to falling asleep when it gets quiet, so it begins to drift off. It loses focus. On the other hand, of course, if you're too tense, you start getting restless. You've got to find the right balance, and one of the ways of doing that is to take a lot of interest in the breath—what the breath energy can do in the body—because the more clearly you can see the breath, the more refined your sensitivity to the breath, then the more refined your sensitivity to what's going on in the mind will be as well. It's like listening to a piece of music far away. You have to make yourself very quiet to hear it, very sensitive.

As Ajahn Fuang once said, if we could get into nibbana simply through the force of desire, we all would have gotten there a long time ago. The path requires refinement: that you're very careful about how you look at things, very careful about how you listen to things. Try to notice the little things going on in your mind right now because, after all, who you are is something you can't see. But what you're doing is something you potentially *can* see.

So don't let the abstractions get in the way. Make sure you're asking the right questions, focusing on what you're doing, the craft of what you're doing right now. Seeing it as a craft is one way of making more interesting what you're doing. We're not just plopping down and accepting whatever comes up. There's a skill in

staying properly focused. As you work on that skill, you find that a lot of things get uncovered: a type of knowledge that really is useful.