

Purifying Gold

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The Buddha gave several discourses where he compared training the mind, getting the mind into concentration, to refining gold. In the first step, you have to wash the gold. The gold has gravel, little bits of grit, and then tinier bits of grit. So first you have to get the really gross stuff out. That, the Buddha said, means getting rid of any misbehavior or misconduct in body, speech, and mind. In other words, you hold to the principles of the precepts. You're trying to clear the mind of any greed, ill will, or wrong views, so check your views right now. Remember that right view says that some of the things you're going to experience right now come from your past actions, and you have to accept them. But a lot comes from your present actions. In fact, when the Buddha gave the list of causes leading to suffering, he said that your present intentions get experienced even before you experienced the senses, which are basically the result of past karma. So, given that your present intentions are the precondition for the present moment, you want to get them well trained, and have a strong sense that they really do make a difference.

When the Buddha talks about being heedful, it means both being heedful of the little things that can cause trouble, not underestimating them, but also not underestimating the good things the mind can do. Each time you decide to come back to the breath, chalk it up as a little victory. Don't get discouraged by the fact that the mind sometimes wanders away or is chattering all the time. Try to notice the moments between the chatter. Appreciate them.

From that heedfulness in terms of gross things outside, you then turn it to the next step: the more refined little bits of grit in the gold, which are thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of ill-will, and thoughts of harmfulness—in other words, wrong resolve. You want to make sure your resolves are right. You're going to look for a happiness that doesn't have to depend on sensual fantasies, doesn't have to depend on sensual pleasures outside. You look for something within. You want a happiness that doesn't cause anyone any suffering.

Then you get to the more refined dust in the gold. It's an interesting list: thoughts about your home, thoughts about your family, and thoughts about not wanting to be despised. That last one jumps out of the list. A lot of our trouble when we deal with other people is when they look down on us, and we don't like being looked down on. We get upset. But if we let the angle of their look determine our behavior, we're being a slave to them. After all, a lot of people *want*

to go through life looking down on other people. You have to realize that that's their business. You want to develop some good qualities inside that other people don't know anything about.

So, they're looking down, looking up, looking askance: Whatever angle they look at you doesn't really matter. What matters is that you can have something inside that you know is really of worth. When I was in Thailand—I don't know how it was with other Western monks, they seem to have been treated with a great deal of respect—but I'd hear people saying, "These Westerners, what do they know? Maybe they can follow the outside precepts and everything, but what can they know about meditation? How can they train their minds?" Ajaan Fuang was not one of those people, of course, but there were people who said that. So I figured I'd show them. But my way of showing them wasn't really to show them, it was to show myself that I could do this, that I would try my best.

So, you want to make sure that other people's dismissive glances, dismissive attitudes don't eat into your mind, because otherwise they keep the mind from getting refined and purified. Try to wash them away, realizing you're not here to please anybody, you're not here to impress anybody. You're here to take care of the problems in your mind. That's when you can get the mind into concentration.

The Buddha talks about this. In the first step of the concentration, you still have thoughts of the Dhamma. As you try to get the mind to settle down, you can engage in recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, recollection of your virtue—in other words, ways of thinking that will induce you to want to settle the mind down. Or thoughts that give rise to a sense of *samvega*, thinking about how if you don't find your happiness inside, you're going to have to find it outside, and that's the area, as the Buddha said, where everything is laid claim to. You'll have to fight other people off to get your little bit of that pleasure.

Remember his vision of the fish in the stream that was drying up, fighting one another over that last bit of water, and still they're all going to die. Realize that it's all pointless. Those ways of thinking are helpful to remind you that you do want to get the mind settled down. But then they can get in the way, too, so you try to cleanse the mind so it can be really quiet. There may be a little bit of chatter around the edges, but don't let it gnaw its way into the center.

This is where the Buddha said you want to bring three qualities to bear. One is right effort, to generate the desire to get still here, and then to look after the mind to see what works in getting the mind to abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones. Of these three qualities in the Buddha's list, this is the one that contains the germs of discernment, realizing that this is something you've got to do.

A while back when I was in Malaysia, I was giving a talk on right concentration, and one of the questions afterwards was, “You make the meditation sound like something you do, but we’ve been told it’s something that you don’t do, it’s something you just sit there and accept.” Well, I’ve never seen the Buddha teach that. What you accept is where you are, as a starting point. But then, you ask yourself what needs to be done.

To balance right effort, you try to get the mind to be still in right concentration, focused on one thing. And remember, you’re focusing on one thing in the midst of whatever background chatter there may be in the mind. If you wait for everything to be quiet before the mind can settle down, then it’s never going to settle down. It’s like waiting for the world to be perfect before you’re willing to practice the perfections. We live in an imperfect world, but you can have your little island of perfection in here. We live in a noisy world, but you can have a little island of calm. Even when your mind is noisy, you can find an island of calm in there someplace. Focus on that and see how far you can let that island expand out into the rest of your body.

Then you balance the right effort and the concentration with equanimity. In other words, you watch what’s going on, and you try to watch with a steady eye. This is why the Buddha, when he was teaching meditation to Rahula, said to make your mind like Earth. Earth doesn’t get upset when disgusting things are thrown on it. It doesn’t get excited when pleasant things are thrown on it. It’s patient, equanimous. You want to be able to observe the mind with patience and equanimity so that you can know what’s really going on.

As the Buddha said, you have to bring these three qualities to bear: right effort, right concentration, and equanimity, and you have to know which one to emphasize at which time. If you simply tried with right effort, he said it would be like putting gold into a crucible and then sticking in the fire and leaving it there. It would burn up. If you simply tried to get the mind concentrated, it would be like blowing on the gold. It would cool down, cool down, cool down, but you wouldn’t be able to make anything out of it then, either. And if you just used equanimity, it would be like just watching the gold. Nothing happens at all. You combine the doing with the watching and the resting. Then, when you can combine those activities in the right proportions, you get the gold just right. You can make it into anything you want.

This is where the Buddha talks about trying to develop insight, posing questions in the mind: Where’s suffering right now? You’ve read what the Buddha had to say, that it’s in the clinging, so where are you clinging? What’s the cause? The cause comes from inside. It doesn’t come from other people. It doesn’t

come from the economy, the climate. The cause is something that's happening in the mind: the craving and the steps leading up to craving. Can you see those? Can you see *any* of them? As the Buddha pointed out, there are many steps leading up to craving, and if you see any connection between one and another, focus on that until you get a strong sense of dispassion around it.

Then you see that all the things you create in terms of your self-identity, your sense of the world, the sense of the pleasure you're trying to find in that world, all come from these random movements in the mind—some of which are pretty blind.

So, the things to look for are here. Once you've got the mind like pure gold, then you can make it into whatever you want. You want it to be malleable, so you can put it to its purpose. Think about the Buddha on the night of his awakening. He started out wanting to know about the problem of what happens after death. He saw that there are many, many rebirths, one after another, on many different levels.

Then the next question was, why are there so many rebirths, and why do they happen on so many different levels? He could have spent the whole night just watching the different things he had been before or that he might be in the future. But no, he wanted to know what was the motive cause. And he saw that it was your actions—but not just random actions.

There were some people that had that kind of knowledge before him, and they had seen cases where people did good in this lifetime and then in the next lifetime were born in a good place, and cases where someone had done evil, breaking the precepts in this lifetime, and were born in a bad place. So, they came to a very quick conclusion that your actions did have an impact on what would happen after death, but it was all very deterministic. You break the precepts once and you're destined to hell.

But the Buddha looked more carefully. He saw that sometimes there were cases where people did good in this lifetime but they went to a bad place, or they did something bad in this lifetime but they still went to a good place. So, he had to look deeply into that. Why was that? He saw that it had to do sometimes with actions in previous lifetimes, or with a change of heart afterwards, or with attaining right view or wrong view at the moment of death. In other words, you could have done good but then you develop a wrong view at the moment of death, and that could pull you down. You have been doing bad things, but you develop right view, and that could pull you up.

That insight made him want to look further into what is the power of your intentions in the present moment: the fact that they could counteract influences

coming in from the past. That's why he focused in his third knowledge on what was happening in the mind in the present moment—again, simply in terms of actions, not thinking about who was doing them or who was going to reap the results—just action, cause and effect. That approach was what enabled him to gain awakening. He started with that question about what happens after death. How can the mind be trained, or how can anything be done to stop the suffering of death? And he stuck with that question all the way through.

It was important that he wasn't waylaid by other questions. He found that other people, seeing the process of rebirth, spent all their time trying to figure out what it is that stays the same inside you, that makes you, you? They got pulled away; they got sidetracked. But he stayed focused on the issue of what happens at death, and is there anything the mind can do so that it doesn't have to suffer from death? He found that by sticking with that question, he arrived at the answer. It was his willingness to stick with that one question that kept him going all the way to the end of suffering.

So when you get your mind to settle down, when it does get quiet, remind yourself that you're not here just to get quiet. You're here to solve the problem of suffering. Take your lump of gold and make it into the best ring or earring imaginable. In other words, take your mind as it's quiet and do something really useful with it, something that will give results that time can't undo. That's when you get the best use out of your gold. That's what all this refinement is for.