

Always Observe Your Mind

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There's a difference between practice for the sake of rebirth, a good rebirth, and practice for the sake of going beyond all rebirth. But there are also some similarities between the two. The Buddha talks about four qualities conducive to a good rebirth—conviction, virtue, generosity, and discernment—and there's a lot of overlap between that list and the list of factors in the path to the end of suffering, especially in the virtue and the discernment. More basically, there's overlap in the sense that, as you're following those four practices that lead to a good rebirth, you're learning a skill you'll need on the path: the ability to look at your mind.

After all, conviction: What's the message of conviction? Think about the Buddha's three knowledges on the night of his awakening. The first two knowledges had to do with rebirth. An important message was that rebirth was fueled by kamma. Where you're reborn is determined by your actions. And your actions are very complex. There were cases that the Buddha saw where people had done good in this lifetime, but then they went to a bad destination, and there were other cases where they had done bad things in this lifetime but then went on to a good destination.

The people before him who had seen those cases said that rebirth was totally random. Your actions had nothing to do with your destination. But the Buddha looked more carefully, and he saw that those people had other actions in their previous lifetimes, or at times before those actions in this lifetime, or after those actions in this lifetime, or they had changed their minds at the moment of death. The people who had done bad things developed right view at the moment of death. And vice versa: Those who had done good things slipped off into wrong view at that moment.

That taught him a lesson: that a mental action can have a lot of power, and that what you do in the present moment can fight against all the things you've done in the past. It's an important lesson to keep in mind. Your mental actions are what matter most, and they can have a lot of power.

Of course, you see this in the third knowledge, when the Buddha gained insight into the four noble truths. The cause of suffering isn't aging, illness, and death, and it isn't what people do outside. It isn't bad sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations. It's your craving and clinging. The big issue is inside.

So if you really have conviction in the Buddha's awakening, it means you have to focus on your mind, because the mind in the present moment has a lot of power.

The same with the principle of virtue: When you take the precepts, you're basically setting up an intention, and your intention is what's going to make all the difference. If you change your intention—say you have the intention not to kill but then you intend to kill, you intend not to lie but then intend to lie—it's the intention, followed by the act based on that intention, that's broken the precept. If you happen to say something that's untrue but you don't know it's untrue, that doesn't break the precept. If you step on some bugs without intending to, you don't break the precept. So the fact that you're taking the precepts keeps directing your mind back to observing itself: What intentions is it acting on right now?

Our problem is that we get so entangled in sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations that we forget to observe the mind that's going after these things. I think I've told you about the time when a monk from Bangkok came to stay at Wat Dhammasathit. There was one evening when the sunset was particularly lovely—the sun was low in the sky, casting a golden light and long shadows across the fields—and he commented to Ajaan Fuang, “This place is really not bad, you know, Than Phaw. It's really beautiful.” Ajaan Fuang immediately said, “Well, look at what's saying that it's beautiful. That's the important thing right now.”

Or think of that story in the Canon of the monk going down to bathe in a pond. There was a lotus in the pond, and he bent over to sniff the lotus. A deva suddenly appeared and said, “You just stole the scent of that flower.” The monk's immediate reaction was, “Come on, that's not stealing.” The deva replied, “If you're really intent in gaining freedom, you have to see even the slightest fault as being as huge as a cloud.” The monk came to his senses and said, “Thank you very much. If you see me make other mistakes like that, please let me know.” She said, “I'm not your servant. You look after yourself,” and she disappeared.

Her point is right: He should have been looking after his own mind. That's why we have the precepts, not only to make life better for ourselves and for the people around us, but also to focus our attention on our intentions: What do we *mean* to do? That's the difference between breaking a precept and not breaking a precept.

Similarly with generosity: There are different factors that go into determining how much you're going to benefit from an act of generosity, but a huge factor is your motivation. In the beginning it seems a little bit like a Catch-22. The Buddha

says that when you're generous, you benefit in this lifetime and you benefit future lifetimes. But it turns out that the lowest motivation for generosity that would get you into heaven is the idea that in the next lifetime you'll gain back what you gave.

Now, the Buddha's not saying it's bad. It's just that it's not the most productive motivation. He goes off from there to higher motivations: the thought that giving is good. Or, "These people are poor and hungry, I have more than enough, it's not right that I don't share with them." The motivations get higher and higher, and the reward in the next lifetime gets higher and higher as well. The focus is more and more on the state of the mind: "Giving is good." "The mind is made serene. It's gratified by giving." "Giving is an ornament on the mind." He keeps pointing back more and more to the mind.

After all, if you're going to be observing the mind, it's best to start out with observing yourself doing good things, like following the precepts and being generous. You're more willing to look at the mind at times like that. Of course, when you get used to looking at it when it's doing good things, then when it starts thinking bad things, things that are unskillful, you tell yourself, "I don't want to look at this." But as they say, if you don't like the news, make some good news of your own. You don't just sit there and put up with a bad mental state. You realize that you can change it.

Underlying all these qualities, of course, is discernment—what the Buddha calls penetrative discernment into arising and passing away. Now, that doesn't mean simply watching what comes and goes, and leaving it at the coming and going. To be penetrative, your knowledge has to deal with the causes: What's causing things to arise? What's causing them to pass away? Penetrative knowledge also deals with gradations: which actions are worth doing, which ones are not worth doing; which mental states are worth cultivating, which ones are not worth cultivating.

So if you get used to living your daily life like this—looking at your intentions, looking at the mind—then it gets a lot easier to settle down and meditate. You've developed the alertness to watch the mind, to make sure that it stays with its object. That ability to step back and observe yourself will serve you in good stead throughout the practice. It's the ability that allows you to improve your concentration and then to begin to learn how to analyze concentration when it's gotten really good.

So the practice is seamless. Everything the Buddha teaches us, as he says, is contained in the four noble truths. The message of the four noble truths is again and again and again: The causes for suffering are in the mind. The path to the end of suffering starts in the mind, and starts with right view. So the Buddha keeps

pointing you back: Observe your mind. Observe your mind. That's how you grow in the Dhamma.