

Learning How to Learn

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When we meditate, we're learning a skill—learning how to do something we've never done before, learning to do it well—which is different from simply learning *about* something. The knowledge where you simply memorize words, analyze words, understand the words: That's one thing. But learning how to *do* something is a different kind of skill.

This is where the skill of learning how to learn becomes important. This is one of the reasons why the *ajans* take so seriously the various skills around the monastery—how to keep the monastery clean, how to chant, how to take care of your robes, how to provide the requisites. You want to learn how to do all of these activities well, and, as you learn how to master them, you've learned an important lesson about how you go about changing your ways. After all, the teacher can only teach you so much. If it's a subject where it's all in words, the teacher can teach you all the words, but, when it's a skill, you have to master the doing yourself: not only getting good at doing it, but also becoming a good judge of how well you're doing, so that you can improve yourself.

As the *ajans* say, they can't be there to hold your hand all the time or to present things to you on a platter. When you're off meditating on your own and problems come up, you can't go running to the teacher all the time. You have to figure out how to deal with the problem on your own. So learning how to learn is an important foundation for what we're doing here.

There are two teachings that are relevant here: One is the Buddha's teachings to Rahula when Rahula was still seven years old. The other is the teaching on the four bases of success. It's good to compare the two, because they throw light on each other.

You know the teachings to Rahula. They fall into three steps. In the first step, the Buddha basically said, "Before you do something, ask yourself: What do you expect out of this action that you want to do? What results do you expect? If you expect any harm for yourself, any harm for other people: Don't do it.

The second step: "If you don't expect any harm, then go ahead and do it but, while you're doing it, watch it. Watch what you're doing, watch the results, and, if you see any harm coming up, you stop. If you don't see any harm, you can continue.

The third step: "When the action is completed, look at the long-term results. If you realize that you did cause harm after all, go and talk it over with someone

more advanced on the path to get some ideas about how not to make that same mistake again. Develop a sense of shame around the mistake—in other words, realizing that your actions were not up to standard, you want to do something better—and then resolve not to repeat it. If there was no harm done, then take joy in the fact that you’re progressing on the path and try to continue progressing even further.”

So those are the teachings to Rahula. Basically, he’s teaching you how to learn from your mistakes: You examine the actions you want to do and are honest about the results they will give rise to. Then you try your best. But even when you try your best, you may find, “Oh, there’s something not quite right”—you notice that. You don’t just say, “Well, I couldn’t do better because....” You have to say, “I did my best but it’s not yet good enough. I’ve got to do better.” This is why making excuses for yourself is in no way part of the path.

At the same time, when you do things well, you should take joy in the fact. But, as the Buddha said, don’t rest content there. Continue practicing. After all, that was the secret to his awakening: He didn’t let himself rest content with even his skillful qualities. As long as there was room for improvement, he kept on trying.

Now, we can compare these instructions to the four bases of success, which are basically four ways of giving rise to concentration, but they apply to success in any activity. There’s concentration based on desire, concentration based on persistence, concentration based on intent, and concentration based on powers of analysis. Actually, all four of these things have to be present in any state of concentration. It’s simply a question of which one is dominant.

With desire, of course, the desire has to be focused on the results—what do you want out of this? But then, noting what results you want, the next question is, how do you get there? You have to turn around and look at the means: “What do I do to get to where I want to go?” This reminds you that concentration is something fabricated: It’s done with a purpose. But, to do it well, you have to focus on the causes.

Then, based on that desire, you develop your persistence: You actually do your best. Anything that comes up in the meditation that’s not skillful, you try to get rid of it. Anything that’s skillful, you try to give rise to it, then nurture it, nourish it, maintain it, help it to grow.

At the same time, you’re very intent on watching how it’s going. The Thai translation for this word “intent,” or *citta*, here is “putting your whole heart into it.” It also means paying careful attention to what you’re doing. You notice what’s happening as it’s happening. It’s a quality related to alertness.

Then, finally, your powers of analysis: If things are going well, try to understand *why* they're going well so that you can recreate them the next time around; if they're not going well, try to figure out what the problem is.

Ajaan Fuang really emphasized these last two steps. For intentness, he'd say, "Use your powers of observation"; for your powers of analysis, "Use your ingenuity." Think of the Buddha on his way to awakening. He would try various things and, if they weren't working out, he'd try to figure out, "Well, what else could I try?" If that didn't work out, "Well, what else could I try?" He kept posing that question: "How could it be done better?" That required a certain amount of imagination, which is an important part of your powers of analysis.

So, take those two teachings—the teachings to Rahula and the teaching of the four bases for success—and put them together.

Desire would then apply to the first step in the instructions to Rahula: both to your original intention to act, and also to your overall intention not to cause harm. That gives two levels of desire: an overarching desire—in this case, to find a happiness that doesn't cause any harm—and then your specific desires that arise: You want to do this, you want to say that, you want to think this. Are these little intentions in line with your overriding intention or not?

That's how you have to understand how desire functions in the practice. You've got to have your main desire, as if you have a constitution. When the other desires come up, they're like laws that you're going to promulgate, and they have to be in line with the constitution. You have to check them to make sure they are.

This is one of the reasons why the noble eightfold path has right resolve as one of its factors, and generating desire as part of the factor for right effort. Right resolve is your overarching set of desires; right effort has to do with individual desires—individual intentions—as they come up.

Once you're sure that the desire is right—the intention is right—then, persistence: You actually try to do it well. This corresponds to the second step in the instructions to Rahula. You do your best. You don't just slough it off or phone it in. You try to put out your best effort, because the only way you're going to learn is from doing your best and then realizing that it's not yet good enough. If you don't do your best and then say, "Well, I wasn't really trying, so it doesn't really matter," you never learn anything that way. If you want to learn, you do your best.

And then, watch the results: That corresponds to the factor of intent—watching the results of your actions as you're doing the action and after the action is done.

Finally, your powers of analysis come in when you try to figure out, if it was done well, what should be your attitude? If it was not done well, what should be your attitude? If it was done well, the attitude is: Take joy but then continue practicing, continue looking for improvement. If it was not done well, you go back and say, “Okay, what was the mistake? Was the mistake in the intention? Where did I do it wrong? What can I change?”

These two bases of success—being intent to observe your actions and using your powers of analysis to figure out how to make improvement—correspond to the third step in the Buddha’s instructions to Rahula.

If you have these qualities all working together, you can learn from your mistakes—and that’s how you learn how to develop skill: doing your best but knowing how to learn from your mistakes. That’s the attitude you want to have as a practitioner.

I think I’ve told you about the medical school where they taught brain surgery, and they wanted a series of questions for the candidates who were coming into the school, to figure out who would be a good candidate. Everyone applying had A’s, but just because someone gets A’s on a report card doesn’t mean that that person’s going to be a good surgeon. It requires a different set of skills.

The questions they finally settled on were, one, “Can you tell us about a mistake you made recently?” If the person didn’t admit to any mistakes, then that person was not going to be accepted as a candidate. But then, if the person *did* admit to a mistake, then the next question was, “How would you do it differently to avoid that mistake the next time around?” If the person hadn’t thought about how he or she might do it differently, again: not accepted.

You want people who try their best, who recognize a mistake for a mistake, and then immediately try to figure out how not to commit that mistake again. That’s the proper attitude for learning how to learn, the attitude that the Buddha taught to Rahula, the attitude that he taught in the four bases for success.

So, if you want your meditation to go well, it’s good that you develop this ability to learn from your mistakes in every level of the practice, even the simple things that you see around the monastery: keeping it clean, learning how to chant, learning the basic skills for making brooms, sewing robes. All of these things can contribute to having the right attitude.

Otherwise, if you just phone it in, if you do only half best, you’re never going to grow. Yet the teaching is all about growing. That’s why the Buddha *taught*, so that we could learn how to stop suffering, which means that we have to learn how to change our actions, improve our actions, master our thoughts and words and

deeds as skills. Because it's only then that we have any hope to get beyond the suffering we keep causing ourselves.