

The Psychology of Harmlessness

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Meditation is both a matter of technique and a matter of values: what we do and why it's worth doing. Like right now, focusing on the breath: As the Buddha says, you discern when the breath is long, you discern when it's short. The word "discerning" here doesn't mean you simply watch what's already there. The analogy he gives is of a turner, someone who turns wood on a lathe. The turner discerns when he's making a long turn and when he's making a short turn—and he has the choice. He's the one who chooses to make a long turn or a short turn. It's the same with the breath. You try to notice what kind of breathing feels good right now, long or short, because one of the purposes of this step is to give rise to a sense of energy or rapture and also to a sense of pleasure.

So notice, when you breathe long right now, is it pleasant? If it's not, you can change. Make it shorter or in long, out short; in short, out long. From there you can extrapolate—heavy, light, fast, slow, deep, shallow. Then as the body gets energized by the breath, you want to spread your awareness to fill the whole body, because you want that sense of energy to suffuse the body along with this sense of pleasure. Then, when everything feels nicely energized by the breath, the breath energy in the body feels full, you can allow the breath to calm down.

Those are the basic steps in terms of the breath.

One of the interesting features of those steps is that the Buddha doesn't say simply, "Let the breath calm down." He says, "Calm bodily fabrication." Bodily fabrication, *kaya-sankhara*, is a technical term. It basically means the in-and-out breath. Why would the Buddha use a technical term? He wants to alert you to the extent to which you're shaping your experience. The way you breathe shapes the way you feel. Verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself, will shape the way you feel. Mental fabrications, the perceptions and feelings you focus on, will shape your mind. You want to be sensitive to what you're doing right now in these terms because that gets into the question of values as to what's worth doing. But first you want to see what you're doing.

Sometimes you hear it said that breath meditation, especially the way the Buddha teaches, is simply a matter of being with the breath however it's going to be. You just watch. You don't exert any influence on it at all. But that's impossible. You're already influencing the way you breathe. If you deny that to yourself, you're not setting yourself up for discernment at all. You're putting up walls. Things go underground and stay underground. The best way to figure out

how you're already fabricating things is to consciously change the way you fabricate things and see which parts of the mind resist. If the breath is pleasant, energizing, and then calming, it feels really good. That way, you get around a lot of the resistance. But still there are parts of the mind that want to do things their old way. And you're going to be uncovering a lot of that as you meditate.

That's where the question of values comes in: Why are we doing this? A big part of the mind says, "Well, just do it as stress reduction, that'll be okay, and then we'll be able to go back and do the things that we already like to do but well-rested and with a sense of well-being." But the whole purpose of meditation is to change your mind, to change your values, to bring them in line with the values of an awakened one, the Buddha. His values come in the form of four noble truths. Suffering is clinging to five aggregates. It's caused by craving. You can put an end to it by putting an end to the craving. And the way you do that is through the noble eightfold path. Those are the four truths, the basic truths that the Buddha teaches. They carry duties—they have their "shoulds." You should try to comprehend suffering. You should try to abandon the cause. You should try to realize the cessation of suffering. To do that you should develop the path.

So these are the rock-bottom values that we adopt here as we practice. Other teachings fit in the context of those values—for instance, the three characteristics or the three perceptions.

One of the ways of comprehending your clinging is to see that the things you're clinging to are inconstant and stressful. Now, if we didn't have the four noble truths as a framework, a part of the mind would say, "Well, they may be inconstant and stressful, but if this is the best I've got, this is what I'm going to keep on doing. I'm not going to give up holding on to things I'm holding on to. You've got to show me there's something better."

That's what the third noble truth is all about: that by letting go of the craving and clinging there is an ultimate happiness that has no suffering, no stress at all. That truth changes the landscape. The things that you're holding on to look pretty paltry in comparison with the possibility of the total end of suffering. Why are you holding on when the end of suffering is possible when you let go?

So the four truths contain a value judgment. When the Buddha talks about the three characteristics, the question there is in terms of form, feeling, perceptions, thought fabrications, consciousness: Are these things constant or inconstant? They're inconstant. If something is inconstant, is it stressful or easeful? The fact that it's inconstant and unreliable means that it's going to develop some stress. Then the conclusion is not, "Therefore, there is no self." The

conclusion is, “Is this worth calling ‘me’ or ‘mine’?” And in light of the third noble truth, the answer is No.

So the Buddha’s map of reality has “shoulds” built into it. If you took those three characteristics on their own without the context of the four noble truths, they wouldn’t have any “shoulds.” Things are inconstant, stressful. Okay, so what? If we didn’t have the possibility of a total end of suffering, as I said, we’d say, “Well, even if they’re inconstant, stressful, it’s the best I’ve got, so I’ll hold on. And even though they may not be entirely under my control, I can control them at least to some extent, so let’s see what I can squeeze out of them”—for whatever purposes you might have.

Yet from the Buddha’s point of view, given the four noble truths, yes, you can control these things to some extent, but what you want to squeeze out of them is the path. Look at the five aggregates. When you’re sitting here meditating, form is the sense of the body that you’re feeling right now: the breath as it goes through the body. Feeling is the sense of pleasure you’re trying to develop. Perceptions are the mental images you hold in mind of the breath and how you relate to the breath. Fabrication is how you talk to yourself about this as you’re doing it. And consciousness is aware of all these things. So there you are: the five aggregates. You’re using them. You’re squeezing some good out of them by turning them into the path. Why? Because this path does lead to the end of suffering. These are the things you need to develop that will take you to that threshold of that end.

So when the Buddha analyzes the mind, it’s all for the purpose of putting an end to suffering. When he’s analyzing suffering, he points out that it’s coming from within the mind. It’s caused by the mind, and is suffered by the mind.

So a lot of his teachings about psychology—how to understand the mind—differs from Western psychology in that it has a strong, what you might call ethical component: how to understand the mind so that it can become skillful. Very skillful. All the Buddha’s analysis of mental functions is pointed to that purpose. This is why when someone was asked one time if the Buddha taught whether the world was eternal or not eternal, finite or infinite, going down the whole list of the hot issues of the day— it was a layperson who was one of the Buddha’s students who was answering: He said, “No, no he doesn’t teach those things.” Finally, the person asking the question got frustrated and said, “Well in that case, your teacher doesn’t teach much of anything at all. He’s a nihilist.” And the layperson said, “No, that’s not true. What he teaches is skillful and unskillful behavior—he shows the distinction, saying that skillful behavior should be developed; unskillful behavior should be abandoned.” The layperson then went to

see the Buddha and asked him, “Did I explain what you said correctly?” And the Buddha said, “Yes.”

Someone once translated one of the Abhidhamma books, the one that starts with making the distinction between skillful, unskillful, and neutral mental components, and he called the translation, “A Manual of Buddhist Psychological Ethics.” This is a psychology with an ethical component. An ethics, of course, treated as psychology, but the values are built in.

Years back, I was asked to write a review of a book on positive psychology, which is the study of how people get happy. I was taken aback by the fact that the author was saying, “We’re going to study the psychology of happiness without any reference to values, because, after all, we’re going to be scientific. A lot of people find happiness in doing unethical things, but we’re not going to judge that.” That was the point I focused on in the review: If you want to understand this book from a Buddhist point of view, you have to see that karma is a rock-bottom principle. The fact that there is skillful, unskillful behavior is a rock-bottom reality. It’s one of the Buddha’s categorical teachings. From the Buddha’s point of view, any kind of happiness that does not take into consideration the well-being of other people is not going to last. So if you truly want to be happy, you have to think about what’s skillful and what’s not—skillful in the sense of what’s harmless to yourself and other beings—and do your best to abandon what’s unskillful.

So the Buddha’s psychology is a psychology of harmlessness taken to the nth degree: not just in terms of how you treat other people but also in terms of how you treat your own mind—and how you deal with the mind in a way that ultimately can put an end to suffering all around. This is why the techniques of meditation cannot really be separated from the values when doing them, because of the duties that the Buddha recommends for the four noble truths: Those duties embody values.

In the beginning we do that out of conviction.

I was struck a while back when hearing someone say that the four noble truths are not beliefs. Well, they’re truths for the Buddha but they’re still beliefs for us until we’ve proven them for ourselves. But they’re good beliefs, good working hypotheses, because they make you look at your mind in a way that really compels you to be as skillful as you can. That’s the best kind of psychology there is.