

Your Actions Are Yours

April 2, 2022

When you look at the similes that the Buddha gives for the practice, you're struck by how many of them have to do with people developing skills: the wise, experienced cook; the carpenter; the archer. He's making the point that as you're working on the meditation—and in fact with the whole practice—you're trying to become more skillful in how you act. So think back on the manual skills you've developed and figure out what lessons you've learned from them that you can apply to the practice.

One of them is you have to have desire, but you have to learn how to focus the desire. If you simply sit there wanting to have a good dish come out of the kitchen, it's not going to happen. You have the desire and then you actually do the actions that have to be done to produce that dish. And you have to take responsibility for what you're doing. Otherwise, you're not going to learn. You have to see the connection between, "I did this," and, "It didn't come out right." You have to figure out, "What did I do wrong?" If you say, "It didn't come out the way I wanted it to, so therefore I'm not responsible for it," that's not going to help develop any kind of skill.

Look at the Buddha's instructions to Rahula. Before you act, ask yourself, "This action that I want to do"—notice there's an "I" there—"will it lead to harm for myself, for other people, or for both?" While you're doing the action, the question is: "This action that I'm doing..." Can you take responsibility for the action while you're doing it? And then, "This action that I have done, did it lead to harm, did it not lead to harm?" And even if you didn't intend for it to lead to harm but it ended up causing harm, you still recognize it: "This is something I did. I created these results. I have to figure out how not to repeat that mistake." When you take responsibility for your actions, then you can learn from them.

There is a certain school of thought that says, when you're practicing, you have to have the idea that there's nobody there practicing. If you think that somebody's practicing, you're starting out with wrong view, and that's going to skew everything. That's what they say, but it's obvious from the way the Buddha teaches Rahula that that's not the case. You hold on to a sense of "I" that's responsible, that's trying to be capable and wants to learn. That's the "I" you want to cultivate. Without that sense of "I," it's going to be really hard to develop any kind of skill at all. Actions just come and actions go. If there's nobody responsible for them, they just seem to come and go. And some people think that's wisdom.

When the Buddha talks about the discernment that's penetrative—discernment into arising and passing away—the important adjective there is that it's "penetrative." When your discernment is penetrative, what does that mean? It means that you recognize that there are

skillful actions and unskillful ones, skillful arisings and unskillful ones. If something is skillful, you want to encourage it; if it's not, you want to abandon it.

So again, there's going to be some desire there—the desire to be skillful—and there's going to be a sense of “you” who's responsible for the actions. You've got to maintain that all the way down the path. Even on the higher levels of the noble attainments, non-returners still have a lingering sense of “I am.” We talked about this a little bit this afternoon. Stream-enterers have abandoned the idea that “I am this” with regard to the aggregates—either identifying with the aggregates, or identifying yourself as the owner of the aggregates, or believing that you're in the aggregate—that is, for example, you might have a sense of infinite consciousness and you're there inside the infinite consciousness, or you're in there in the body—or that the aggregate is in you. For example, you identify with the infinite consciousness and then assume that you're functioning inside that.

All those kinds of beliefs, the stream-enterer has abandoned. But there still is that lingering sense of “I am,” because there's still work to be done. As the Buddha says, with stream-entry, you've perfected virtue, but there's still work that needs to be done in terms of concentration and discernment. And the “I am” is going to be doing that work. When that work is done, then you can put the “I am” aside.

So there's an “I” lingering around even at that stage of the path. One of the images in the Canon is of clothes that have been washed. Even though the dirt is out, the agent that got the dirt out is still lingering, its scent is still lingering in the cloth. After all that, you put it away, and the lingering scent finally disappears. The analogy, though, doesn't explain why it disappears. It disappears because it's not needed anymore. But as long as you need it, use it.

So take responsibility for your mistakes as much as you take responsibility for the things you do well. Only then will you learn from your mistakes. This judgment of who made a mistake is not a final judgment; it's more judging a work in progress.

We've been working at this question of how to find happiness for who knows how long—how many lifetimes. We have to recognize, okay, we've made mistakes. If you don't recognize that, then how are you going to learn? This is not one of those cases where you say, “Well, I didn't intend for it to be this way so I'm not responsible.” You are the one who did the action, you've got to live with the results. That's the way kamma works. You've got to figure out, “What am I doing wrong?”

It's amazing how many habits carry over from life to life to life. I think I've told you that story of King Asoka. There's a belief that Ajaan Lee was King Asoka reborn. When I learned that, I got a biography of King Asoka that included some translations of the King Asoka edicts in the back. So I translated some of them into Thai for Ajaan Fuang to listen to. There was one where Asoka says to his government workers, “If you want to satisfy me that you're quick enough in responding to my desires, you have to know what I want before I do.” Ajaan Fuang laughed at that and said, “Two thousand years. He didn't change.”

If you look at your actions now, you'll probably see a lot of patterns that are responsible for the way you are now, even though the actual action that got you here—in this particular set of circumstances—may have been an action from the distant past. But the patterns carry over. Think in terms of the seven treasures, of the noble treasures the Buddha set out. Which one of those are you still lacking? Are you lacking in conviction, lacking in a sense of shame or compunction, lacking in virtue, lacking in learning about the Dhamma, lacking in generosity and the goodwill that goes with generosity, or lacking in discernment? If you see that something is missing, work on that.

Think of this as a set of skills you're developing. Focus on the causes; the causes are your actions. Look at things you've done in the past and didn't come out right. But don't simply sit and look at them. Ask *why* they didn't come out right, and don't just stop at the question, "why?" You have to go back and remember, "What did I do?" Sometimes these things are way back in the past, but you can look at the way you approach your breath right now. That will tell you a lot about your mind—how you approach things. Are you able to maintain a good emotional balance as you work with the meditation and put up with times when the breath is not going well? Do you have the stamina to stick with it until you can try to figure things out? That's a good sign. If you don't have that kind of stamina and you just give up and say, "Well, this is not working," that's not going to get you anywhere.

So with the act of judgment about responsibility, we're not here for a final judgment. We're here learning how to master a skill, and using your powers of judgment are an important part of improving your skill. After all, ultimately, you're going to be asking the question: "What is worth doing, what's not worth doing? When is a sense of self worth maintaining and when is it not worth maintaining anymore? When does it have value? And when does it no longer have value?"

Think of it as a tool. There's a simile that the *ajans* like to use a lot: While you're building a chair or a desk, you need to hold on to your tools. You need to take good care of them. But when the desk is done, the chair is done, then you can put the tools down. But don't put them down until the work is finished.