

Joy in Getting It Right

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When you meditate, you're watching your mind, so you want to give yourself a good mind to watch—"good" not in the sense of being smart with book learning, but more in the sense of having good qualities of the heart—a mind that's used to acting on impulses for generosity, virtue, goodwill. That kind of mind is easy to watch. You want to understand the different steps in the processes of how it creates a thought, how it creates a state of being, a state of becoming. These things are a lot easier to watch when the mind is creating good states of becoming, acting on good thoughts, because it would be disheartening to see all the nefarious intentions you usually give into, if that's your habit.

Years back, I was co-teaching a meditation retreat, and one afternoon, one of the retreatants suddenly broke down and started crying. It was really freaky. He was heaving deep sobs, but everyone else in the room was sitting very quietly as if nothing were happening. I found out later, one, that he was a former drug dealer, and that somehow, sitting and getting the mind really quiet, it came to him how many lives he had ruined. The other thing I learned was that this is a common occurrence in meditation retreats. Take people right off the street with no basic training in virtue, no basic training in generosity, and negative things come up.

This was why Ajaan Suwat was so right that other time when he was teaching a meditation retreat at IMS. The people seemed really grim. And he commented that they were grim because they didn't have a good background in virtue or generosity. Part of it, he said, was that when you practice generosity and virtue, you gain some confidence in the Buddha, that this path, this teaching, is a path of happiness. But also, as I said, if you're used to acting on good intentions, then when you want to understand the process of how an intention is formed and the internal dialogue that goes around it, it's a lot easier to watch when the intentions have been good.

Which is why an important part of the meditation is not simply sitting here, knowing how to stay with the breath, but living a life of being generous, being virtuous, and developing goodwill for all beings—perfecting these good habits as skills. In other words, you want to get it right, because after all, you're going to be trying to develop a path that's composed of right factors, everything from right view to right concentration, and they all have to be approached as skills.

So you're not just good, but you're also inquisitive to what it means to be really good, to be skillful, to act on good intentions so that they give the best possible results.

Skill in generosity goes beyond the simple impulse to be generous. You're trying to develop the right attitude toward the act of giving a gift. You're trying to develop the right motivation. You try to give gifts that are appropriate, and you try to find good people to give them to, so that the act of generosity really does generate happiness.

You may have read that list of the different kinds of motivation you may have for being generous. It starts out with, "I'll get this back," sometimes hoping to get it back with interest later in this life or maybe the next life. That's the lowest motivation. It does count as a good motivation, though. The Buddha says it leads to one of the lower levels of the sensual heavens. But there are higher motivations, such as reflecting on the fact that giving is good. It's a good thing to do. Or that, when you see that there are people who are lacking in things that you have, you have more than enough, it's not right that you don't share. That's an even higher motivation. Or you see that giving makes your mind serene and joyful. All the way up to, "It's a natural ornament of the mind"—in other words, it's just a natural expression of the mind, without your thinking about what you're going to get in return. So you can work on your motivation.

You can also work on your attitude. You're not just going through the motions. You think: "Something really important or good will come from this act of generosity."

You give gifts that are appropriate. It's interesting: When the Buddha measures the goodness that comes from a gift, he never talks about the monetary value of the gift, aside from saying that it's good to give other people things that are at least as good as the things you'd ordinarily use, so that you can be proud of the gift afterwards.

In other words, you stop and think in these ways about what it means to be generous, and how generosity can give rise to happiness. As you develop that skill, you get more thoughtful. You see implications in the act of generosity that you may not have thought of before.

The same with the precepts: In the beginning, you simply abide by the rules. Then you find that there are times when it's difficult to abide by the rules. So you figure out how to stick to the precept, yet at the same time not cause yourself or anyone else any needless harm. The primary example is when you know some information that somebody might want to abuse, and they ask for it. You've got

to figure out some way of not giving the information, but at the same time not telling a lie. That develops your ingenuity.

And the simple fact that you're keeping the precepts means that, one, you have to be mindful to keep the precept in mind. Two, you have to be alert to your actions. And three, you really have to be ardent in doing your best to withstand any impulses to break the precepts. Mindfulness, alertness, ardency: These are skills you're going to need as you meditate.

And finally, with goodwill, as you spread thoughts of goodwill, you stop to think about, "What does it mean, 'May all beings be happy'?" You realize that you're wishing for them to create the causes for happiness. At the same time, you're learning how to resist any impulse to ill will. And you learn to recognize ill will for what it is. Sometimes it can dress itself up as righteous anger, a desire for justice. But wanting to see somebody suffer, no matter how bad that person has been in the past, does count as a form of ill will. So you've got to be careful.

And you learn how to watch your mind this way. You learn what it means to create a state of goodwill. It's not a natural expression of your innate nature, because it's just as easy to have ill will for other people as it is to have goodwill. With the brahmaviharas, we're trying to take our human goodwill, which tends to be partial, and making it universal. That requires verbal fabrication, mental fabrication, all the components of a good state of concentration.

So these are the traditional forms of *puñña*, which is usually translated as "merit," but better translated as "goodness." All too often, these forms of goodness are treated as something totally separate from the practice of meditation. But goodness and meditation are very much entwined. Acts of goodness prepare the mind for meditation by developing good habits, particularly the habit of trying to do something well, to get it right.

I was reading, a while back, the strange idea that the hope of getting things right is a major cause for stress and suffering; therefore, you should learn how to relax around it, let it dissolve away, and just be okay with things as they are, and not try to impose your ideas of perfection on things. That attitude may be based on a misreading of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, where it talks about seeing feelings arising and passing away, discerning a feeling of pleasure, discerning a feeling of pain, neither pleasure nor pain, seeing mind states arising and passing away, a restricted mind, an unrestricted mind, concentrated, unconcentrated. It makes it sound as if you just watch whatever's going to happen, without wanting it to be good or bad.

But when you look into the list of feelings the Buddha talks about, there are feelings of the flesh and feelings *not* of the flesh. Feelings of the flesh are things

that happen pretty much willy-nilly. But feelings not of the flesh have to do with your desire to practice. A pleasure not of the flesh is the pleasure of concentration. It's not going to happen on its own. A pain not of the flesh comes from your desire to gain awakening, realizing that the desire is not yet fulfilled. That's a good pain, a pain that can help motivate you to practice. Equanimity not of the flesh—the equanimity that comes when getting into fourth jhana—is also something you have to do. As for the mind states, they're usually paired—concentrated, unconcentrated, released, unreleased—the implication being that if an unskillful mind state is there, you want to switch it over to its skillful counterpart.

So we are trying to get it right. After all, the duty of mindfulness is not simply to watch things arise and pass away. Its duty is, if there's something you know that is skillful that's not there in your mind, you're mindful to give rise to it. Once something good has arisen in this way, you're mindful to try to maintain it, to make sure it *doesn't* pass away. This is called “mindfulness as a governing principle.” So you are trying to get it right—but you're learning to find joy in getting it right. You don't treat it as a chore.

As with any skill, this comes with a sense of pride, a sense of self-esteem—and it's healthy pride, healthy self-esteem. It's all to the good. Sometimes people like to quote that passage from Ajaan Mun's poem, where he talks about how one of the final things you have to get over as you practice the path is the desire to be good—the implication being, as they say, “Well, you can let go of that one pretty early on.”

But that's not what he's saying. After all, look at his practice: He was somebody who really tried to make something good out of himself. Everything in the training, from the most minor rules all the way up to practice of liberation: He tried to master it. As his students said, he made himself totally Dhamma. And he didn't do that by not trying to be good, not trying to get it right. It was trying to get it right that put him in a position where he could finally let go of right and wrong, because he'd mastered things. He'd brought his mind to completion. In Ajaan Lee's words, he let go as a rich person, not as a pauper.

So it's perfectly okay to want to get it right. In fact, we've got to make the effort to get it right. This is a path with right and wrong factors. If you're going to be on the path, you've got to get it right. The trick is learning how to enjoy getting it right as you do it. As you develop the right attitude, it does become a joy. You can look at your behavior, you can watch your mind, and it's a good mind to watch. There's a sense of satisfaction that comes. That's entirely in line with the practice.

So as the Buddha said, when you see that you've done something right, take joy in that fact, and then continue training. That's the right attitude to have.