

Mindful of the Buddha's Shoulds

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There are people who say they like Buddhism because it doesn't tell them what they should do. Which is very ironic because the Buddha thought that was the most important thing he left behind: a basis for deciding what you should and shouldn't do. That, he said, was one of the main duties of a teacher.

Of course, he didn't impose the shoulds on you, but as he pointed out, if you wanted to put an end to suffering, this is what you should do.

There were teachers in his day who said that everything you experience is based on past actions or on the act of some creator god, or else it's totally random. The Buddha would actually seek out those people to argue with them. He said that if you teach any of these ideas, you're basically saying that when people kill, steal, have illicit sex, lie, or take intoxicants in the present moment, it's because of something they did in the past, or because of a creator god, or because of random spontaneous events. When you teach people that, you don't give them any basis for deciding what should and shouldn't be done. "Should" and "shouldn't" don't even have any meaning. Everything is already determined, one way or another. Their present actions, their present choices, have no role in what they experience.

With that, he said, you're leaving them unprotected. You're not fulfilling a teacher's duty. As he saw, our actions are our most important possessions. Think about that chant we had just now: We're subject to aging, illness, death, separation from all that we find dear and appealing. This body we have is going to leave us, and before it leaves us it's going to start falling apart. Our relationships with other people are going to end. What do we have left to depend on? Our actions.

So when our actions are so important, *of course* there are going to be shoulds: "What will be the best thing to do?" If you look deeply into the mind, you find that it's very proactive. It's not simply reacting to things outside: The mind is proactive in looking for happiness.

One of our most basic questions comes from the experience of pain. On the one hand, we're bewildered by it, because pain—whether it's mental pain or physical pain—can come in so many different ways. It comes so unexpectedly. You think you've figured out one cause for pain, and here comes another one, which may be very different.

So we search: "Who knows a way or two to put an end to this pain?" This means we're already looking. We ask other people, we look around on our own, and the Buddha is offering his teachings as an answer to that question. There are ways that we can act that will help get us beyond suffering—and he lays out the path.

There's a right path and there's a wrong path. One of the main factors of the right path is right mindfulness, and the function of right mindfulness is to remember what the Buddha said about what should be done.

As for the details of what should be done, he laid them out in the first factor of the path, which is right view. Wherever there's pain, suffering, stress, you should try to comprehend it. That's not normally our first reaction. Our first reaction is to try to run away from it, or to push it away.

But it's like one of those toys where the more strongly you try to push it away, the more strongly it comes bouncing back. So, No, you should try to comprehend your suffering. You comprehend it by seeing that the suffering itself is something you might not expect. The Buddha gives examples: aging, illness, and death are suffering, not getting what you want is suffering, having to be with what you don't like, having to be separated from what you do like. These things are all suffering.

We're familiar with all these, but then he says the common denominator of all of them is something unexpected: clinging to the five aggregates. Now, the aggregates here are *activities* of the mind. There's the body, and even the body, he says, is an activity: Form he says, deforms. Feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, acts of consciousness—all these are activities that we do.

And because we try to feed off these things—that's what the clinging is—we suffer. In fact, the suffering is in the clinging.

Why do we cling? Because of craving. We crave sensuality—the act of fantasizing about sensual pleasures—or we crave what the Buddha calls *becoming*, which is taking on an identity in a world of experience. It can be either a world in the mind, or the world outside. Then there's craving for non-becoming: You find yourself in a world or in an identity that you really don't like, and you'd like to see it destroyed. All these forms of craving should be abandoned.

Then there's the third noble truth, which is the fact that suffering can be ended by abandoning the craving. In other words, you attack the problem at the cause, not at the suffering itself. All too many of us try to let go of the suffering when we should actually be letting go of the craving.

The way you do that is through developing the fourth noble truth, which is the noble eightfold path: right view, right resolve, and all the way through right mindfulness and right concentration. This is something that *should* be developed.

So, these are things you keep in mind—there are some *shoulds* here. You should comprehend suffering, you should abandon its cause, you should realize the cessation by developing the path. Those are things you've got to keep in mind because the mind is constantly looking around, trying to decide what to do.

A lot of its talking to itself is basically, “What am I going to do next? What am I going to do next? What should I do next? What’s worth doing next?” The Buddha puts those two questions together: “What should be done?” and, “What’s worth doing?” They’re basically the same question.

In other words, you don’t have to worry about some outside authority who’s giving the orders. Look at the Buddha’s recommendations: If you want to put an end to suffering—which is a worthwhile desire—then you should do what is worth doing.

For instance, with the path: We’re sitting here right now. This is the path we’re on right now—focusing on the body, just the body in and of itself, as it breathes in, as it breathes out, ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

We keep this frame of reference in mind so that we don’t get entangled in the greed and distress that come with the states of becoming that we could either think into being in the mind right now, or when we think about the world outside. When you think about those things, then the shoulds begin to change. But when you stay simply with the body in and of itself, you can remind yourself, “This is what I should be doing. I should try to get the mind to settle down, to be right here.”

So, when you’re talking to yourself, this is what you do: You talk to yourself about, “This is what I should be doing.” Each time the mind slips off, you remind yourself, “Come on back.” And try to breathe in a way that feels good so that you’ll *want* to come back.

The Buddha talks about this: breathing in a way that gives rise to a sense of fullness or refreshment, breathing in a way that gives rise to a sense of ease. When you have that sense of fullness, refreshment, and ease, you allow it to spread around through the body.

Think of it going down the nerves and then down the blood vessels, out to every pore. If there are any patterns of tension in the body, you can think of them dissolving away as this easeful breath energy comes through.

In the beginning, you have to talk to yourself about this, to remind yourself where you are, what you’re doing, because it’s all too easy, when the breath gets very comfortable, to zone-out. So you give it work to do: You remind yourself, “Okay, you can’t just wallow in the ease.”

You let the ease spread so that it saturates the body. It may sound like you’re just giving yourself a bigger pillow to wallow in, but as you’re mindful of the whole body, it strengthens your alertness, it strengthens your awareness. Then the conversation can go more into the background—this inner chatter where you’re telling yourself what to do. In fact, it gets down to simply reminding yourself, just, “Breath, breath, breath.” Or, “Whole body, whole body.” The messages become a lot simpler.

It’s like that passage in *The Sirens of Titan* where two of the characters go to the planet Mercury. In Kurt Vonnegut’s vision of the planet Mercury it’s a large honeycombed crystal. One side, facing the sun, is hot; the other side is very cold. This causes the crystal to vibrate.

Inside the lattices of the crystal are little animals called *harmoniums*, which look like translucent kites with suction cups on the corners.

And they don't have to feed off of one another. All they have to do is feed off the vibrations in the crystal. You can imagine what that's like—an infinite source of food, with no struggling, no fighting, no killing. You can just live off the vibrations. An extremely pleasant environment. There's less and less to talk about, so they basically have two messages that they repeatedly send telepathically to one another. One is, "Here I am, here I am, here I am." The other is, "So glad you are, so glad you are, so glad you are."

In the same way, when you can provide the mind with a sense of well-being like this that permeates the body, the messages of the mind get a lot simpler. They may not be as interesting as your usual chatter, but they're very satisfying.

And you can ask yourself, "Why do I have to be interesting?" You'll have something to get interested in soon, when you work on discernment, but first get the mind to settle down and have this sense of ease. Allow it to saturate the body.

Then the question will come up, "Is this as good as it gets?" And the answer is "No, there's better." But for better, you have to understand the suffering even more. Even in this concentration, when the mind settles in like this and there's a sense of ease and well-being, there's still some stress. It's very subtle, but it comes and it goes because it's all fabricated. You have to keep putting it together.

So you have to start asking questions about these fabrications. Here again, you're talking to yourself, but you're asking questions. And you're asking questions in line with the four noble truths and their duties again: Where is the clinging here? Can you see it come and go? And what's the craving? Can you see that come and go?

To see these things, you have to get the mind very, very still. And you'll find that better than rapture and refreshment and ease is a simple state of equanimity. The mind settles in, on a more and more subtle level. The body feels still, the mind feels still, which means that any movements in the mind will show themselves more clearly. Then you ask yourself, "Okay, what's sparking those movements?"

So again, there are some questions you ask yourself. And they're questions you *should* ask. It all depends on how you frame the questions. Again, in terms of the four noble truths: Where's the stress? What is the cause? What can be done to let go of that?

With some causes of suffering, all you have to do is look at them and you see: "I do this and there's going to be suffering." It's very easy to see. You ask yourself, "Why on earth would I do that?" So you drop it.

Others are more difficult because they're things you like to do, and you have to convince yourself that it's not worth it. This is where the Buddha asks you to look at things in terms of:

- How the stress arises / what's causing it.
- How it passes away.

- What's the allure? What is it about what you're doing that you like doing?
- Then you look for the drawbacks.
- And when you see that the drawbacks outweigh the allure, that's when you let go.

So there's an inner conversation about *what's worth doing* at all the different stages of the practice. In some cases, it's more blatant. And it starts from the very beginning: When the Buddha recommends generosity, recommends virtue—these are things that you *choose* to do because they're worth doing. That's a value judgment.

Then you get the mind into meditation. Even a simple practice like goodwill is a mindfulness practice—you've got to keep reminding yourself to do it. Goodwill for all beings doesn't come naturally.

You focus on the breath—you have to remind yourself to stay with the breath. In some cases, you actively have to talk to yourself, especially if the mind finds it hard to settle down. You have to ask yourself, "Why?" Try to figure it out. There will be an inner conversation, and when you figure out the problems, you can settle in more clearly, more fully.

The conversation gets less and less until you begin to notice that the concentration itself can take you only so far. Then you look around to see where the clinging still is. Well, you're clinging to the concentration, but you don't want to go back to cling to the things that you left as you got the mind into concentration. So the question is, where is the alternative?

With the questions you ask, you're trying to find answers. It starts with that very basic question: "Who knows a way to put an end to suffering?" And you follow through: There's a *should do*, and a *shouldn't do*, and you've got to remind yourself which is which—which is why you talk to yourself.

When the answer to the last question comes, when the *reality* of the answer comes, that there's something deathless in the mind, that's the point where you totally let go of all the conversation.

But even after you've had that experience, you have to ask yourself, "Well, what now?" You want to make sure that you've taken care of all the different causes of suffering. And you'll find out that there are stages in awakening.

So again, there are things you have to remind yourself to do and not to do—things that are worth doing, things that are not worth doing. There's a series of value judgments that keep on taking you to the end.

So, that's the nature of the Buddha's *shoulds*. He's offering them to you as recommendations. He's not imposing them on you. But he says that if you follow these instructions, you get results. But you have to use your ingenuity as you follow the instructions. It's not simply a matter of following orders, following the rules. It requires your own sensitivity and your own discernment. But you find that it answers that question: It is possible to put an end to suffering. And not just individual pains, but *all* the suffering the mind creates for itself.

So, when the Buddha offers these shoulds, it's really a gift rather than an imposition. And we do well to keep these things in mind so that we can act on them until we arrive at the realization that “The path is a path of action that puts an end to action.” After all, the deathless isn’t something you *do*. There’s no *doing* in it at all. That’s when you can put those shoulds down.

As the Buddha said, when someone has gained total awakening, he has nothing more to teach that person. And that person’s path can’t be traced. He says it’s like the footprints of birds in the air as they fly past—they don’t leave any footprints. They can’t be traced.

Ajaan Lee makes a comparison. He says, “While we’re following the Buddha’s path, it’s as if we’re his servants, but the Buddha’s provided a way for us to buy ourselves out of slavery, to find real freedom.” That’s the best gift of all.