

## *Right Fear*

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The Buddha lists three roots for unskillful behavior: greed, aversion, delusion.

A number of people have expressed surprise that he didn't add fear to the list.

The reason is because fear is not always unskillful. There are times when fear is appropriate. Fear of causing suffering, fear of acting in an unskillful way: This is an important fear, one that you should respect.

It's when fear gets tied up in greed, aversion, or delusion: That's when it becomes unskillful, because we start fearing the wrong things.

For example, when you're observing the precepts: There come times when you know that people are going to take advantage of you because you're honest, because you're telling the truth. You have to decide which is to be feared more: telling a lie or having people take advantage of you? If you're wise, you've got to decide that telling a lie is more fearful, something more worthy of fear.

What this boils down to is having a strong sense of what's really valuable in your life and what's not. We tend to latch on to so many things: assuming that our happiness has to depend on this, has to depend on that, these things, this reputation, this level of comfort, material comfort, physical comfort. But there will come incidents, circumstances in life that are going to force you to make a choice: Which of the many things that you hold on to are really important and which ones are not?

It's when you can be really clean about your decisions that you can live without a certain level of material comfort—if your precepts require it. Or you can live without a certain level of respect in the world if your precepts require it, because sometimes you get respected for the wrong reasons.

But when you can make that break, there's a sense of dignity that comes along with it. There's so little dignity in modern life. Someone once wrote a piece stating that everybody now has become a salesman or a saleswoman. We're always pushing something, always hyping something. Even religious teachers are basically salesmen. The teaching on skillful means, for example, has basically become a teaching to justify all kinds of ways of changing the Dhamma in order to please people. And what you end up doing is pandering to other people's desires, pandering to their likes and dislikes.

When you're not selling the Dhamma, you're trying to sell yourself, present yourself in a certain way that people will respect you or that people will think highly of you, people will like you. This is something you have to watch out for:

the desire to be liked all the time.

Because sometimes you're required to do the right thing that people don't like. But again there's a dignity that comes with that. If you're clear about your motives, you're clear about the results of your actions, clear that truthfulness requires this, then you have to be willing to risk being disliked, risk suffering loss in terms of the world.

But you maintain your virtue. You stick with the training. You're loyal to the vision of what the Buddha pointed out as a really honorable life, a really worthwhile life.

This is why the precepts are such an important part of the practice. There are times when they force you to make choices, force you to divest yourself of certain attachments. When you bite the bullet and follow through, you come out cleaner on the other side.

The Buddha talks about purity as a moral quality. It's not just purity in terms of following rules. It also involves a sense of integrity. You've learned how to divest yourself of a lot of encumbering baggage.

This is where fear is useful: fear of not having integrity. That's an important fear, a fear that should be listened to.

As for other fears, you gauge them by circumstances. The Buddha doesn't have you go out and do foolhardy things unless the integrity of your mind demands it. Otherwise, you gauge the situation, and whenever fear does come up in the mind, you have to ask yourself, "Where's the unskillful part of this fear? Is greed involved? Attachment to certain things—are you afraid you're going to lose them? Where does aversion come in?—aversion to other people, other things you find fearsome."

As for the greed, it can include attachment to the fear that other people will look down on you if you don't descend to their level. There's a lot of this going on around in the world right now.

Then there's delusion: the delusion that makes you identify with things that people are attacking, and you get afraid of losing them.

Again, the Buddha doesn't have you throw things away. After all, you need your body, you need a certain level of comfort, you need a certain level of well-being in order to practice the Dhamma. When you've got the tool—you've got the body, you've got this life—you don't throw it away.

It's only when the practice makes demands in terms of virtue, the development of concentration, the development of discernment: That's when you take risks.

If you find yourself unwilling to take those risks, you have to ask yourself, "Where's the attachment?"

In this way, you get a really good take on where your defilements lie, where your attachments lie—issues you might not have noticed before. People might ask you in the abstract, “Are you attached to this?” “Well, no, not really.” But when push comes to shove, you grasp at it. You’ve got to ask yourself, “Is that attachment really worthy of you?”

We were talking the other day about the Buddha’s teachings on shame. He’s not teaching you to have low self-esteem. He’s teaching you to have very high self-esteem in the sense that certain things are beneath you: certain ways of speaking, certain ways of acting are really unworthy of a good human being. He encourages you to develop a healthy a sense of shame at the idea of doing those things.

This is where a strong, integrated sense of self is a very important part of the path. When you have a clear set of priorities, a clear sense of how your actions are going to affect your life, how they’re going to affect your happiness down the road, and you’re willing to make sacrifices in the present for the sake of long-term happiness: That’s what’s meant by having an integrated sense of self. It’s an important strategy on the path.

Just make sure that you have a really clear sense of what is genuinely worthwhile. When that’s clear, then it’s a lot easier to see which of your fears should be listened to and which ones should not.

A lot of the confusion comes when we don’t have a clear sense of priorities, where we don’t have a clear sense that certain types of happiness are going to require sacrifice, and that it’s a good thing to make those sacrifices.

Years back, when Ajaan Suwat was leading a retreat at IMS, one of the questions toward the end of the retreat was, “How do we carry our practice into daily life?” In his response, he didn’t talk much about daily meditation practice. He mentioned it briefly. And he didn’t talk about particular techniques to carry out into the daily world. What he talked about was the precepts, because they form the foundation for any meditation practice that’s going to work.

The details of when you’re going to meditate during the day and how you bring breath meditation into your daily life: Those are things that each person has to explore for him or herself. Which techniques work at which particular time: That’s a very personal matter. What’s more absolute is that the precepts are essential all the time.

On the one hand, they clear up a lot of issues. When you’re wondering what to do in a particular set of circumstances and you’re running up against the issue of whether you should lie or whether you should take something or whether you should kill the bugs in your home, and the precepts say No: What are you going to do? It’s a challenge.

Those are important challenges for teaching you discernment. They teach you a sense of which of your attachments are worth holding to for the time being and which ones are not. They throw the whole issue of priorities into sharp relief. They force you to develop your ingenuity.

At the same time, when you follow the precepts in difficult situations, they give you the sense of integrity that makes it easy for the mind to settle down. If you can train yourself to be consistent in making what you see as the skillful choice at any given time, the mind has a lot less remorse, a lot less self-recrimination afterwards.

Even if it turns out that you made a mistake, as long as you act on what you see are good motives, skillful motives, you're doing the best that can be humanly expected. That makes it a lot easier to live with the mistake—and to live with yourself. When you can live with yourself, the mind can settle down right here in the present moment. Without the precepts, no technique can give you that sense of inner wholeness, inner integrity.

So you might say that meditation technique basic step number one is: the precepts. It's only when you adhere to the precepts that other meditation techniques have a chance of really working, leading you not only to concentration but also to discernment—the discernment that's honest enough to see your mistakes, that's not afraid of seeing your mistakes: honest enough to admit them and ingenious enough to find a way to not make the same mistakes again.

Those are the qualities essential to any kind of meditation that's going to have a chance of leading you to release, leading you to the end of suffering.

The important stages of the practice are the stages where the path comes together. And it can't come together unless the precepts are solid, unless your intention to follow the precepts is solid.

When that's solid, there's that sense of integrity—which is related to integer, it's a whole number—your mind is a whole number. And it's only in that context that the path can become whole. All the parts fit together.