

A New Framework

December 13, 2004

The Buddha once said that it's possible to abandon unskillful behavior and to develop skillful behavior. He also said that if this weren't possible, he wouldn't teach people to abandon unskillful behavior or to develop skillful behavior. It wouldn't make any sense. But because it is possible, that's why he taught these things.

This is why we're here meditating: There's a possibility of changing, if developing new habits. Most people, if you look around, don't work at developing new habits by the time they get to a particular age. They seem set in their ways. I remember once when I was in high school, I was talking to my girlfriend's mother. She was telling me how much she had learned from reading a particular book, and I was surprised. She was already way up in her 50s. I kept thinking to myself: How can somebody that old change? How can they learn anything new by reading a book?

And on average, it is pretty unlikely that people will change. But the question is: Do you want to stay average or not? Science deals in bell curves. Social science deals in bell curves, too. And all the time they're lopping off the far ends of the bell curves as being statistically uninteresting. That's what you do when you're trying to generalize.

But when you're leading your own life, where do you want to be on the bell curve? You want to be on the far good end. You want to break the curve if you can. So what are the qualities that help you break the curve, so that you can make the change and become skillful?

I was reading recently an article which talked about the difference between really good doctors and great doctors. And the author was saying that when you see a great doctor in action, you see how focused he is, how aggressive he is in getting the patient to cooperate. Look for the difference between being in the 99.05 percentile, and the 99.5 percentile. You push for that extra little bit of difference, and it makes all the difference in the world when you calculate it out. It really does make a huge difference, especially when you're talking about people surviving.

You've got to look at your mind in the same way. You're working for the survival of your mind, so that it doesn't create all sorts of problems and suffering for itself. If you're content to muddle along, not much change is going to happen. You have to be focused. You have to be aggressive. The terms the Buddha uses,

when he talks about how he gained awakening, come in a refrain that he repeats over and over again. He said, this is what happens when someone is heedful, ardent, and resolute. In other words, you break the curve by developing those three qualities.

Being heedful means seeing the danger in careless behavior, sloppy behavior, and really treasuring the good qualities of your mind, realizing that these are things you have to protect: things like conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment. So you have to be very alive to the difference that your choices make. This is where we push ourselves out of the bell curve: by being very careful about what we do.

Ardent: This is usually translated in terms of right effort. You recognize what's skillful, you recognize what's unskillful, and you do what you can, everything you can, to prevent unskillful states from taking over the mind, or if they're already there, learning how to get rid of them, let them go. On the other hand, you learn how to encourage skillful states, and maintain and develop them once they're there. How do you know what's skillful? You look at your own actions. It's this quality of alertness that makes the effort of your ardency right effort.

We were talking today about why we're not just automatons, why we're not totally determined from past conditioning. It's because we can look at what we do. This is what alertness, *sampajañña*, is all about: looking at your actions, seeing the results, realizing there is a connection, and having the ingenuity to think of other ways of acting if you don't like the results of your actions.

You measure them in terms of the four noble truths. In other words, are you causing suffering? Or are you not causing suffering? You're causing stress or you're not. These are things that anybody can notice, yet most people don't look very carefully. Or they don't make the connection between the fact that they're suffering and the actions they've done. It's so easy to blame somebody else, to blame outside conditions, to blame the past. People who sit around blaming and complaining are the ones who don't make any changes.

You need to realize: It's your actions that make all the difference. Even when outside conditions are bad, the question of whether you're suffering or not depends on how you're relating to those conditions. That determines whether you're suffering or not. That the realization that enables you to change, spurs you to change.

There's a teaching on what's called transcendental dependent co-arising. It talks about how conviction that there has to be a way out of suffering comes from the fact of suffering itself: seeing it, looking at it, and then from that conviction, the rest of the path grows.

This is where you have to be resolute. You have to focus on this issue above everything else: what you're doing, the results that come, and whether they're as good as you want them to be. This is where the heedfulness comes in again. It keeps forcing you to raise the bar.

It's this combination of qualities—heedful, ardent, alert, resolute—that makes all the difference. This is what allows us to change, allows us to put an end to suffering. So value this quality of alertness. Try to be as sensitive as possible to what you're doing. All the Buddha's teachings aim this way. When you take the precepts, it's meant to make you more alert to what you're actually doing. The precepts are not vague ideals. They're specific promises you make to yourself. You're not going to kill; you're not going to steal. You're not going to engage in divisive speech, harsh speech, or idle chatter. You're not going to lie or take intoxicants. Then you have to keep watch over your actions to make sure that you keep your promises to yourself.

All too often, you hear the precepts played down. Some teachers say, well, they're not hard and fast rules, they're just general guidelines, and they're for you to interpret as you like. They're not commandments. These people are apologizing for the fact that there are precepts in the Buddha's teachings, trying to declaw them, take out their fangs. But the fangs and claws are not there to bite you. They're to bite away at your unskillful habits. And why would you want to identify with your unskillful habits anyhow? It's when you set a specific promise for yourself and then try to keep to it very meticulously: That's when you begin to see precisely what you're doing. You begin to see the movements of your mind a lot more clearly than if you hadn't made that promise.

The same principle applies to concentration. You make up your mind that you're going to stay with one object, one preoccupation: the breath. Once you promise yourself that, then you try to stick with it. Heedful, ardent, and resolute. In other words, resolutely trying to stick with it, this one thing. Ardent in being really serious. Giving it your all.

The heedfulness is when you're very careful to notice even the slightest movement away from your chosen object. Not being complacent about it, not being apathetic.

It may sound strict and unpleasant, but you know that when you're staying with one object, and the mind does settle down, developing a sense of familiarity with the object, it has a chance to really rest. So it's not just all pain and effort. It's effort in learning how to manage comfort. After all, you're developing skillful habits in the mind. And what is one of the rewards of skillful habits? A sense of ease. A sense of well-being. Rapture.

The more meticulous you are, the more heedful, ardent, and resolute, then the better the results you get from meditation.

Even more so when you're working on discernment: You want to be sensitive to even the slightest little bit of stress or strain the mind is causing itself in the way it focuses on things, in the way it deals with issues. You want to see the movements of the mind and be sensitive to the results you get.

The more concentrated you are, the more clearly you can see these things. You see more and more that this process you have of creating a sense of self and clinging to your I-making and my-making: This is what's causing trouble. Up to that point, your sense of "I" was something you wanted to develop. You wanted to develop a more skillful sense of "I." After all, your sense of self is a strategy. When you learn to look at it that way, you can easily change your strategies in line with what needs to be done. You've gained a greater and greater sense of how letting go of certain types of identification really does lighten the mind.

So this pursuit of the happiness and ease that come from skillful behavior: You take that as your foundation. Your sense of self, which used to be really solid, begins to get more... I wouldn't say amorphous, but you begin to see how arbitrary and easily changed it can be. There are skillful and unskillful ways of selfing. When you see selfing as an activity, it totally changes how you relate to everything else. The solid issues in your life are these qualities of being heedful, ardent, resolute, skillful. Your sense of self becomes more and more relative to those pursuits. It used to be that your self was what was solid, and these qualities would come and go. But now your frame of reference switches around.

Ultimately, you get so that your pursuit of being really skillful leads you to the point where you let go of any kind of identification at all.

This is why Ajaan Mun, in his last sermon, said that the one thing you don't let go of is your determination. You let go of your sense of self, you let go of any attitudes or ideas or habits you had that may have been habits for a long, long period of time, but as soon as you see that they're unskillful, and you're determined not to keep repeating your unskillful behavior, that's when you're freed from them. That's when you're freed from causality and conditioning.

So try to make these qualities the foundation of your approach, the foundation of your mental framework: the pursuit of skillfulness, being heedful in that pursuit, being ardent and resolute in that pursuit. Allow other things in your life to become relative to that.