

## *Meditation as a Skill*

*February 27, 2005*

When the Buddha describes concentration practice in the noble eightfold path, he describes in terms of three factors: right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The formula for right effort, which is the first of the three, begins with desire: the desire to develop skillful mental states, the desire to abandon unskillful ones. As for unskillful ones that haven't yet arisen, you try to prevent them from arising, and for skillful states that have arisen, you try to develop them further. You develop the desire to do these things. You work at it. You give it all of your mind—the word for “mind” here also meaning being intent on something, giving it your all.

So you've got three factors there in right effort: desire, persistence, and your full intent, bringing your entire mind to bear on this project. Those are qualities you need to develop a skill. The project of developing skillful mental states and abandoning unskillful ones, in and of itself, has to be approached as a skill. You bring the same qualities that you would to any skill. The Buddha himself makes this point when he keeps comparing the practice to the skills of a cook, a carpenter, an acrobat, an archer, a musician.

So it's important, when you practice, to think about skills you've worked on in the past—what qualities of mind you brought to developing that skill—and then you apply those same qualities to the practice.

Like desire: Desire can get in a way if you're not careful. But without desire how are you going to practice? If you didn't have the desire, you wouldn't be here. So the important thing is to be upfront about the fact that, yes, you do have desires, and you learn how to use them properly. Focus them on the steps of mastering this practice, like working with the breath. The Buddha lays it out in steps. Be aware of short breathing, he says, be aware of long breathing. Train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and out. Allow the breath to grow calm. Be aware of any sensations of pleasure or rapture or refreshment that arise while you practice and allow them to grow calm, so that you can simply be aware of the mind in and of itself. These are all laid out in steps.

What's interesting is that the Buddha doesn't give more precise recommendations than that general outline. After all, while you're focusing on long breathing and short breathing, there are lots of ways you can do that. You can simply allow the breath to come in and out on its own at whatever rate it wants to. Or when you begin to notice that when the breath seems to be doing

this on its own, there's actually an element of intention there, you can play with the intention. After all, you've got the opportunity. You can breathe in any way you want. Why not try to breathe in a way that's comfortable, that feels right for right now? And who's going to find "right" aside from you yourself?

This way, you can bring those factors of desire and persistence and intent to bear on what you're doing. You start with the desire to feel good with the breath. That's okay. It's a good desire. Persistence: You stick with it. If you're really going to learn what kind of breathing feels good, you've got to experiment for a while so that your own sensitivities can develop. That's the element of intent. So you observe. You watch. When you're tired, what kind of breathing feels good? When you're tense, what kind of breathing is right? There's no one there to tell you the answers. You have to find them on your own.

In doing so, you develop these qualities even further. You refine your desire. In other words, you take your desire for awakening and you focus it on your breath, because desiring awakening is like desiring something really far, far away. The desire is there, it's why you're practicing, but you want to focus it on something nearby, something you can actually observe. It's like going to a city on the horizon. If you focus on the city, you'll drive off the road or run into somebody. But if you focus on the road, it'll take you to the city.

The same with persistence: If you think about persistence in the abstract, it seems kind of dry. You stick with something over and over and over again. You do something over and over again. After a while, it's going to get boring if you don't find a way to make it more interesting. This applies to all skills. If you practice—say, you're doing an exercise, the same exercise day after day after day—you get bored. You have to find ways to put variety into what you're doing.

This is when you bring persistence and intent together. In other words, you monitor how the mind is doing with the practice and learn ways to adjust things so that you're happy to keep with the practice. You can maintain that level of persistence without its getting dry, without its getting boring, without the mind rebelling. You begin to notice patterns, cycles of ups and downs, plateaus, and you learn to realize that this is going to be part of the practice. So you work with these things, instead of against them.

What all this does is that it really refines those qualities of desire and persistence and intent, so that the desire and persistence together can develop into good powers of concentration. You're intent on bringing all your awareness, all your powers of sensitivity to bear on what you're doing. That's the seed for insight.

You develop insight by approaching the meditation as a skill. If you look around, you find two extremes in approaches to meditation. One is the attempt to

map everything out, reduce everything to one technique or to a specific set of steps that everybody has to follow. All you have to do is follow the instructions, and somehow it'll produce awakening. But how you are going to gain insight unless you develop your own powers of sensitivity?

The other extreme is to teach no techniques at all. Nothing matters except for the ultimate goal of awakening. Everything else is free-form, almost to the point where you sit there waiting for a spiritual accident to happen.

Neither extreme is the Buddha's approach. He approaches meditation as a skill, where you test things, take steps, working on incremental steps to begin with to get a sense of how cause and effect work in your mind. As you get a better and better sense of how cause and effect work, which approaches work, which approaches don't work, how to get the mind to settle down, how to work with the breath, this teaches you about the patterns of cause and effect. Then you start to explore. You can push the limits: How far can cause and effect go? Exactly how still can you get your mind? How broad can you get your sense of centered awareness? Can you detect any sense of stress even in the quietest states of mind? What happens if you find that stress? What do you do then? How do you locate the cause?

You push the envelope, because there is that promise the Buddha gives in the third noble truth: There's a cessation to suffering, total end of suffering. It's not annihilation, but it does lie outside your normal realm of experience. He mentions that because he wants to capture your imagination. If you don't imagine that such thing is a possibility, you'll never get there. It's like shooting a gun: You never hit any higher than you aim.

So that's the other element of developing a skill. If it captures your imagination first in mastering the steps and then in seeing how far you can go with that particular skill, that's when you really start getting results, and when you develop real mastery of the practice.

The Buddha speaks of the cessation of suffering in tantalizing ways. It's a place of no hunger, he says, a place with no need for desire. In other words, you're using desire as one of the elements of the path, but it takes you to a place where there's no need for desire anymore. He talks about following this path for yourself, being self-reliant, but as your sense of self gets more and more refined along the path, your strategies for happiness—which make up your sense of self—develop into strategies of not-self. The desires by which you define yourself get more and more refined to the point, he says, where you can't define a person who has gained awakening. As a result, you can't describe whether, after death, such a person

exists or doesn't exist or both or neither. That's the ultimate happiness, totally without limits.

All of this is to capture your imagination, to make the practice interesting: How far can go, this practice we're doing? Is the Buddha right? Is there a happiness that's deathless?

Well, work on these skills and you'll see for yourself.