

## *All of a Piece*

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The Buddha once noted there are four kinds of action: things you like to do that give good results, things you don't like to do that give bad results, things you like to do that give bad results, and things you don't like to do that give good results. With the first two, you don't have to think much. The things you like to do and give good results, you go ahead and do them. The things you don't like to do and give bad results, you don't go anywhere near. It's the last two, the Buddha said, that constitute the measure of your wisdom, the measure of your discernment: your ability to talk yourself into doing the things that you don't like to do but give good results, and ability to talk yourself out of doing things that you like to do that give bad results.

It's a very down-to-earth, pragmatic definition of wisdom. And it doesn't apply just to the beginning parts of the practice. It applies all the way through. In the Buddha's way of looking at things, there are not things; there are events that are part of a causal chain. Everything you do is shaped by an intention, which may be skillful or unskillful, and the quality of the intention shapes the results, determines whether they're going to lead to happiness or the pain. This doesn't apply only to physical actions or verbal actions. It also supplies to actions in the mind as well.

So the lessons you learn on the everyday level when seeing that the things you like to do give bad results, and you're able to say no, that's good practice for your meditation, good practice for gaining discernment, good practice for awakening. The principle applies all the way through. The same with things you don't like to do but give good results: Your ability to get yourself to do those things—even something simple like getting up in a cold morning to meditate when you'd much rather lie in your sleeping bag, all nice and toasty and warm: That's practice for awakening.

After all, what is the noble eightfold path? It's a kind of karma. As the Buddha said it's the karma that puts an end to karma. And your views are part of that karma; right concentration is part of that karma.

So it's something you develop where it's skillful, and then you try to make it more and more skillful until you finally get to the point where you don't need it anymore. Then you can drop it. As with concentration, trying to get the mind to stay with its object: There is an intention there, there's an activity there, there are going to be results. Try to do it more and more skillfully. In the very beginning

you're very conscious of this as something you're doing. You sit there and wonder: "When does it get to the point where I don't have to *do* it, when it just *is* on its own?" As long as you're practicing concentration, there's going to be a doing, there's going to be an activity, it's simply that you get more skilled at it. It comes more naturally. But it requires the same wisdom that goes into getting up in a cold morning when you don't want to. Keep focusing the mind on the breath whether you feel like it or not. At the same time, stay away from distractions whether you want to follow them or not. You have to develop the attitude that your wants and your likes are not reliable, especially when you see that they lead in the wrong direction. You've got to learn strategies for saying No. Sometimes it's Not Now, or just plain No. Other times it's more roundabout.

This is where your skill as a meditator comes in. That way, you can begin to tune in to more and more refined levels of concentration. First just getting the mind concentrated is quite an accomplishment. Then there's keeping it there. Once you get really good at a particular level of concentration—in other words, you can tap into it whenever you want—you've got to look into it, because there is that tendency once you start tapping into these things, and it gets easier and easier, that you lose sight of the effort you put into it. You feel like you've tuned in to the Real You or some cosmic Ground of Being, especially in the higher levels of concentration.

So the Buddha reminds you again and again and again: These are activities. You are doing something here. There is an element of intention. Even though you may be tuning in to something already there, there's an element of intention in your tuning in, which shapes your experience of that "already there." He wants to make sure you see that.

As you see the concentration as an action, see it under the framework of karma, it helps prevent you from falling to a lot of misunderstandings.

The same with the issues of discernment, seeing things as inconstant, stressful, not-self: You look at these three characteristics in the light of what you're doing. After all, what *are* you doing? You're trying to find happiness. Do you want a happiness that's inconstant? Well, no. You want one that's stressful? No. One that you can't control? No. So these perceptions are ways for gauging how well you're doing on your path. Even with the whole issue of self and not-self, the Buddha's take on these as things is that he looks at the activity of holding to a view about self and not-self.

This is important. Some people say that the Buddha denies the existence of a small self, but he seems to imply that there's a larger connected self. That's putting words in his mouth. The way he talks about people's views of self covers

everything: a self with form, a formless self, a finite self, an infinite self, a little self inside the body like little homunculus, or your body inside a much larger self. However you define self, he says, that comes under the issue of the not-self teaching. Ideally, just don't even think in those terms. But like karma, it's not as if, when you've learned that, when you're trying to put an end to karma, you just stop doing it. You do your actions and you try to make them more and more skillful. In the same way, you hold to an idea of self—your I-making, your mine-making—for the time being. These are activities that you continue doing on the path for a while, but you learn how to make them more and more skillful. Instead of being the kind of I who's constantly wandering around being sloppy, learn to be an I who's more meticulous, more scrupulous about what you do, what you say. Then become an I who's more meticulous in how you concentrate.

If you look at the Buddha's teachings on meditation, he uses the word "I" a lot, "my" a lot. As long as you're going to have a sense of self, learn to make it skillful. It's by having that sense of self that you feel inclined to work for a goal that's not immediate, something that's going to take time. Otherwise you'd say, "The hell with it, I'm going to grab what pleasure I can right now." The sense of self that tells you, "Okay, you've got to put up with some difficulties right now because you'll experience happiness later on as we keep on the path": That's a sense of self that you'll need to keep you going.

Ultimately, you get to the point where you begin to see that that self, even though you like it, is beginning to cause trouble in very subtle ways—or sometimes not-so-subtle—but hopefully as you're getting more and more skillful, the trouble it causes gets more and more subtle, till you realize that that's the only thing standing in the way between you and true happiness. You see that idea of self, or the person who's in charge of the meditation or who's commenting on what's going on, is the one troublemaker, the one disturbance, remaining. That's when you let it go in the same way you let go of action, let go of karma.

So all these things are varieties of action. Your practice from the very beginning—working on the precepts, working on concentration, developing discernment: The Buddha has you view all these things in terms of actions. Take the lessons you've learned about very simple things—about learning how to abstain from doing things you know are harmful, and how to do things you'd rather not do but you know are going to be good for you: You apply the same principle to concentration practice; you apply the same principle to developing discernment on the more subtle levels. It's all of a piece.

This is why the attitude that learns how to go against your ingrained habits—that can look at things in terms of action and result, realizing that you want to do

the things that give good results and to avoid the things that give bad results regardless of whether you like those activities or not—can carry you all the way through. As you focus on the results, developing these habits on an outside level helps you develop them on the inside levels as well. This way, the good things you do are all of a piece. The good you do on the external level is a very important contribution to good you're going to find inside.