

Teachings to Rahula

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One of the principles of journalism is that if you want to get a revealing interview from someone, you send an interviewer who's young and very innocent-looking to ask innocent-sounding questions. The person being interviewed will go out of his or her way to explain things clearly and end up revealing a lot of things that might not be revealed otherwise. Now, in the case of the Buddha, there was nothing he had to hide, but a very similar principle is at work in the times when he teaches his own son. There are a lot of really good, revealing lessons to be learned, looking at what he has to say.

In the very first lesson in meditation, he didn't talk about closing eyes or sitting or anything. He talked about one thing: the principle of being truthful. You get the impression that Rahula, the son, had lied that day, because that's the first thing the Buddha brings up when he comes to visit Rahula in the evening. Rahula had set out some water for the Buddha to wash his feet, so the Buddha washes his feet and leaves a little bit of water in the dipper. He shows the dipper to Rahula and says, "You see this little bit of water in the dipper?" "Yes." "That's how little goodness there is in someone who tells a deliberate lie without any sense of shame." You can imagine Rahula cringing. The Buddha takes the water and throws it away. "See how that water's thrown away?" "Yes." "That's what happens to the goodness of someone who tells a deliberate lie without any sense of shame. His goodness gets thrown away." Then he shows him how empty the dipper is. Rahula's gotten the message.

Then the Buddha goes into a teaching on actions. "Whatever you intend to do," he says, "in terms of your body, your speech, or your mind, before you do it, ask yourself what kind of results you anticipate." In other words, you look at your intention. What do you intend to accomplish? If you think it's going to cause harm to yourself or to other people or both, don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, go ahead. That's the first principle. Act on good intentions, i.e., intentions that are compassionate.

But simply good intentions are not enough, because sometimes you think something is going to be okay, but it's not. You've got to check it. So while you're doing it, if you see any immediate results from the action that are harmful, you stop. If you don't see any, okay, keep on going. This teaches the principle that sometimes you've got to look for some of the results of your actions right now. Don't think that the teaching on karma means that you do something now and

you reap the results only in the next lifetime. You spit into the wind right now, it's going to come right back at you right now. You put your finger into the fire right now, it's going to burn right now.

But not everything shows its results right away, so after the action is done, you look around to see the long-term results. If you see that it did cause harm, then you go talk it over with someone who's more advanced in the path. This teaches the principle of honesty and integrity. In other words, you're willing to be open about your mistakes. Then you take that person's advice and you make up your mind that you're not going to repeat that mistake again. If, however, you don't detect any harm in what you did, the Buddha says to take joy in that fact and keep on training. In other words, take pride in the fact that you've done well, but you don't stop there. You want to be the kind of person who's always willing to learn.

That simple teaching teaches us a lot about the attitude we need to bring to meditation, starting with the fact that it's not just a matter of what we do when we're sitting here with our eyes closed. It's how we live our lives. The way you act every day is going to have an impact on what happens when you're acting here with the breath, because meditation is a form of action.

You hear about people recommending "choiceless awareness," saying that an awareness in which there is no choice is an awakened awareness. But it's not something you just do. Even with the decision that you're going to practice choiceless awareness, you've made a choice. You've chosen to be equanimous and non-reactive. Sometimes that's skillful and sometimes it's not. You want to get used to the fact that everything you experience is the result of past actions and your present actions and the results of your present actions combined.

Secondly, if you follow the Buddha's instructions to Rahula and get used to being skillful in what you do every day, then it teaches you the habits you need for the rest of the practice, particularly the habit of truthfulness. If you're willing to admit mistakes, then you can learn from them. If you go hiding your mistakes, or if you do things that are unskillful and you don't want to dig them up, then they just get buried under layers and layers of self-deception. And those layers of self-deception are not going to go away just if you sit here and breathe. So it's good to be open and aboveboard about your actions and try to act in a way that's as harmless as possible, both for yourself and other people.

The fact is, the Buddha said, the two things that are most conducive to the practice of right mindfulness are right view and virtues pleasing to the noble ones—in other words, virtues that are really in line with the precepts. And notice that the principles that the Buddha stated here have to do not only with your words and your deeds, but also with your thoughts. This is where we get into meditation.

You're sitting here. What kind of thoughts are you planning to think as you sit here? What do you expect will come? You want some peace and you want some calm. That's a good thing, but you've got to check and see if you're actually doing it. So check your actions while you're doing them. This is another reason why it's important not to think that you're just sitting here being aware, aware, aware without any choices.

Many of these choices exist on a very subtle level. When you choose to breathe in a certain way, choose to focus in a certain place, or choose to hold a certain perception, these are choices that are going to have an impact on how you experience the present moment. And how do you know which ones are skillful? You stick with them.

This is why mindfulness practice has to shade into concentration practice. You can't say, "Well, I held this particular object in mind for a few breaths and then I noted something else and then I noted something else." If you practice that way, you'll never know what happens if you really do hold one perception in mind. You don't know the power of that perception until you've pushed it and tested it. You don't know the power of your intentions or the way you pay attention until you've tested these things. These are the things that are going to shape your experience here, so you want to have a clear sense of what leads to what.

Then you can further refine your good intention to sit here and meditate. Make it an actual skillful intention. But you've got to do it right. That element of skillfulness is what adds wisdom to our goodwill. It's why, when Ajaan Lee was describing mindfulness practice, he would identify ardency as the wisdom factor—the intention to do this really well, because you know that there are drawbacks that come if you don't.

You don't have to look too far. Go into an old folks' home. Look at people who haven't been meditating—what happens to them as they get older. Or just look at yourself and what your day is like if you're not really clear about your intentions or your actions. You begin to realize that the state of your mind is really important and has an impact both on you and on other people. So you want to be responsible. You want to have some integrity. This is a good intention.

Now make it skillful. Figure out what is actually going to work. When you're doing mindfulness practice, it's going to shade into concentration. Figuring out what's working is what the evaluation is. The Buddha talks about directed thought and evaluation when developing concentration. The directed thought is when you make up your mind you're going to stay with one object. That's mindfulness applied to concentration. Then you try to stick with that one object. That's alertness. And then you evaluate it. Does the mind fit with the breath? Do

they feel good together? Does the breath feel good with the body? How do you know? Well, stick with one kind of breathing for a while and see what impact it has on your sense of the body—by working on things as you feel them from within. This is an area of our awareness that sometimes gets sloughed aside.

We have a good vocabulary to describe things out in the world outside, but how you feel the body from within; how you feel your mind from within; how you have a sense of what's going on in there—a lot of these things we haven't articulated to ourselves. That's why it's good to have the vocabulary that the Buddha provides. He talks about sensing the body in terms of warmth and coolness; energy, heaviness and the space that surrounds the body and permeates through the body.

In terms of the factors of the mind, there's attention and intention. When he talks about what are called the aggregates, there's feeling—like feeling tones of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain; perceptions—in other words the labels you apply to things; thought fabrications—the thoughts you put together; and then your consciousness of all these things. These are the terms that the Buddha has you use as you try to figure out what's going on inside.

In particular, those fabrications and perceptions are really important. They're the active side of the mind. You apply a label to something and then you talk to yourself about it. Depending on the label, you can talk to yourself in all kinds of ways, and then the way you talk to yourself is going to determine the way you act.

So you want to learn how to do this well. You apply the label of “breath” to your sensations in the body, the moving sensations, and then you figure out how to get them to go well. In this case, you practice using these factors of the mind in a skillful way. So there's a lot going on here—but you can pare it down.

You want to look at your intentions, at how you carry out your intentions, and then evaluate it. Try to be as truthful and have as much integrity and compassion as you can. You want to do this well—for your sake, for the sake of the people you engage with in the course of the day—and for the sake of people you never even meet. Sometimes your actions can have an impact that ripples out.

So think about these instructions that the Buddha gave his son. They're very good, basic instructions to make very clear what's going on in the meditation. Make sure your intentions are good and then look at your actions to make sure that your intentions become skillful. Have the integrity to admit mistakes; the honesty to talk them over with someone. It's in this way that, as the Buddha said, you purify your thoughts and your words and your deeds. When they're pure, and you look at your actions, there's nothing you can criticize—and it's not because

you have a blind eye. You've actually been trying to open your eyes to your actions.

This practice goes deep, deep, deep into the mind. When the Buddha's talking about very subtle levels of disturbance that can happen in the concentration, it's the same principle: Look at what you're doing. Look at the results. If you see any disturbance that you're creating, even just by the way you perceive things, change the perception. It's the same principle all the way through. So these lessons are not just for seven-year-old kids, which Rahula was at the time. This is a principle that has taken people all the way to nibbana. So try to keep it firmly in mind.

That's one of the things we hold in mind. That's one of the things we're mindful of as we practice. The most important thing happening in the present moment is what we're doing, so do it well.