

What You Don't Like About Yourself

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I was given a book on meditation recently. It starts out by saying meditation is all about being fully present in the present moment. And that was it. The rest of the book was devoted to explaining why it's a wonderful thing to be present in the present moment. But it didn't go any further than that. The Buddha, though, had a further use for meditation and that's to figure out why it is that we create suffering. Even though we want very much not to create suffering, we keep doing it again and again. So the meditation is part of a path to the end of that suffering. And the two most important elements in the path are, on the one hand, right view, the first factor and then right concentration, the last.

Right view shows us that the reason we're suffering is because of things we're doing. On a blatant outside level, it's the things we do and say. On the inside level, it's the things we think. So we're going to have to learn how to act in new ways and think in new ways. In order to have the strength to do that, in order to be in a position where we can actually see where we're doing things wrong, we also need the right concentration.

All of this means that we're going to see things about ourselves that we don't like. It's not a surgical operation where you simply remove something very objectively. You're not coming from the outside and analyzing a machine. You're working from the inside. And you're finding that many of the things that you really like are things that are causing suffering. Many of your deeply ingrained habits are causing suffering. In some cases, they're habits you already don't like. In other cases, they're habits you hold on to. You feel they're important. You feel they're necessary. And although you may see some of their drawbacks, you decide that you can't live without them. Then there are other things about yourself that you already like which you're going to find out are not so likeable.

So you have to brace yourself. But bracing yourself, you're not going to tense up. You prepare yourself by getting the mind in a state of concentration, let your awareness come into the present moment. This is where that book was right: just that one point that we are coming into the present moment to watch things. But we're not just going to stay there watching the present moment. There's a lot going on. And a lot we have to learn how to do better.

One of the Buddha's insights is that we're putting the present moment together. It comes out of results of past actions plus our present intentions and the results of our present intentions: All that together goes to make up the present

moment. And we're constantly having to fabricate it anew, because each present moment just dies away, dies away, and you have to keep replacing it. And so in the rush to replace things, sometimes we grab onto some bad raw materials from our past karma and we have some knee jerk reactions, some old habits—the way we put things together that cause a lot of trouble.

So the first thing is to learn how to put the present moment together in a better way. This is one of the reasons we practice concentration. We take all the elements that are results of past actions and put them together in a good way. You've got the body sitting here: That's past kamma. You've also got the present intention to get the mind still: That's your present kamma. And you're going to build on that. Make up your mind that you're going to breathe in a way that feels good. That's your present intention. As for anything else that comes up, you're going to let it go. You'll find pretty quickly, especially if you're just getting started, that it's hard to stick with that second intention—letting go of things as they come up—because we're so used to being fascinated by our thoughts.

Whatever comes up in the mind, we want to check it out and see what potential it has for entertainment or for being useful further down the line. And sometimes we feel that we're not being responsible if we don't complete a thought. So already in the practice of concentration, you're learning a new value: that thoughts don't have to be completed and you don't have to latch onto them. They can be there in the background. Images can come up in the mind. Sentences can come up in the mind and you just let them be there in the background. You don't have to get involved. Think of them as the results of past karma.

And your question is, "Do I really want to create a new present moment out of that thought or that emotion?" There may be a compulsion someplace inside that says, "I've got to do it." That's what you've got to tame so that you don't have to get involved. You've got something better here. Sometimes a voice will come up and say, "You're being irresponsible." You say, "No, this is actually being more responsible: getting some control over my mind," because who knows what's going to come up from the past?

You want to be in a position where you can say No to anything that would lead you in a direction you don't want to go. This is why, when the Buddha taught meditation to Rahula, he gave him some preliminary discernment practices: contemplation of inconstancy, contemplation of not-self. He mentioned these to Rahula even before he taught him breath meditation so that Rahula could have a few weapons to use as he was trying to get the mind to settle down with the breath.

As for the breath meditation instructions, they're all about learning how to breathe in such a way that you create a really good place to be here in the present moment: being sensitive to how the breath feels, being sensitive to the entire body as you breathe in and breathe out, trying to calm the effect of the breath on the body, learning how to breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of rapture, to breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of pleasure, to breathe in a way where you're sensitive to the perceptions and feeling coming into the mind and to the effect they have on the mind. But you're not going to get involved. You know they're there but you don't get involved. Then if the mind needs gladdening, you breathe in a way that gives a sense of refreshment. If you need steadying, you breathe and talk to yourself in a way that gets things firmly established. And if you find the mind is ensnared in something, you breathe in a way that releases it, think in a way that releases it—because as you're working with the breath, you realize it's not just the breath that's going to be doing these things.

You have to think your way around the breath, try to figure out what attitude to bring to the breath, what attitude to bring to your other thoughts to help you stay with the breath and put those other thoughts aside. This way, you're creating a good place to be inside and you're also learning some good habits. You're learning how to step back from your thoughts, step back from your emotions. Then, when you're coming from a quieter place, a more solid place inside, when you're coming from a sense of well-being inside, it's a lot easier to look a little bit more carefully at the things you don't like about the mind: the mind's unskillful habits. Concentration can do part of the work because it's putting you in a better position. But you also have to bring in right view.

As I said, the Buddha gave the teachings to Rahula on not-self to help step back from the things you don't like about yourself or the things that you actually see are unskillful. But it's important not to forget that the Buddha taught another level of right view, which is more basic but also is many times more applicable to the issues that come up in the mind, and that's the right view about karma and rebirth.

There are huge discussions these days around the teachings on karma and rebirth, with many people objecting about them—as if the Buddha were trying to impose some ancient Indian ideas on us. But it's important to realize that those were hot topics back in India: whether or not there was rebirth and whether or not there actually was karma and to what extent the two were related. So the Buddha wasn't simply picking up an idea from his society or his culture. He found that thinking in terms of karma and rebirth was a useful way to think and you can actually see it as a therapeutic way to think as well.

When you think about old issues, especially things carried over from your childhood, the narratives are really sticky. One way to put a little solvent in the narrative is to think of it in terms of karma: that you don't come into this lifetime a blank slate or totally innocent. We all come in with good and bad karma in our background, so it's only to be expected that good and bad things will happen to us when we're young and as we grow older. This helps to depersonalize things, because it forces you to think back, back, back many lifetimes.

Someone did something nasty to you. Well, maybe you did something nasty to them way in the past, and maybe they did something nasty to you before that. It goes back and forth, back and forth, back and forth until the whole question of who did what to whom becomes meaningless. And there's no need to gather up the details and keep them in your mind in hopes that someday you'll be able to make a report and justice will be done, because the idea of justice requires that there be a beginning point to the story and a clear line of who did what to whom and who was not justified and who was justified. But when there's no beginning point, how are you going to tally up the score? When you think of it in these terms, it becomes pretty pointless to continue that narrative. This is how karma and rebirth can be a solvent in narratives.

Now, when the Buddha taught karma and rebirth, he also taught generosity and gratitude as being essential parts of the teaching on karma. In other words, because there is karma, generosity means something. You make the choice to be generous. When someone is good to you, they've made the choice to be good to you, so some gratitude is appropriate. These two attitudes are also therapeutic.

On the one hand, if you think about issues with your parents, issues of your childhood, it's good to remember that there were things your parents did that were unskillful and you're going to have to unlearn a lot of the things you learned from them. But you don't want to do it in a reactive way as a continuation of the old battles that you had with them. You want to come from a different place where you have gratitude for them, realizing that as human beings they were limited. You're trying to overcome those limitations, but the fact that you're overcoming the limitations doesn't mean you have to hate them. You're simply coming from a better place now, a more mature position: this concentrated mind you've been trying to develop.

And the same with generosity: Forgiveness is one of the forms of generosity. It's a good thing to give to yourself, to others. Then you finish off with some goodwill, goodwill for everybody, realizing that if you have goodwill for everyone, it can help dissolve a lot of those narratives. It helps you look at your habits that you've been carrying over since who-knows-when without a lot of the narrative

glue around them. Then you can see them more clearly. You've picked up a habit from the past, and where you picked it up you have no idea. It may have made sense at some point in the past, but carrying it around now doesn't make any sense anymore. When you look at these habits simply as habits without a lot of the narrative—about who you are, what kind of person you are, what kind of persons you were surrounded by, the people who have wronged you, the people who, whatever—and just look at the habit as a habit, it's a lot easier to see where it's unskillful and where the appeal of having that habit seems pretty empty. That's when it becomes a lot easier to give it up—because we're learning how to change our habits.

It's good to realize that all the elements of the path are really therapeutic. Remember, the Buddha talked of himself as being like a doctor. And he wasn't just a doctor with chemical medicines. His therapy was therapy for the mind, the heart and the mind together. So when you look at his teachings—and sometimes they may seem strange because they're coming from a foreign culture—realize that if you get to know them and appreciate them, they really are therapeutic. That way, the extent to which your heart-and-mind has been involved in creating suffering, you can cure it using the teachings, developing the skills of the path.

And that's what meditation is all about.