

To Be Sure

May 28, 2021

The Buddha had lots of names for the state of mind free from passion, aversion, and delusion. Nibbana, “unbinding,” is only one of them. Its meaning is freedom. That’s one of the attributes of that state of mind. Another attribute is one of safety. Refuge, harbor, the secure: These are some other names of that same state.

That’s what we’re looking for as we practice: something secure inside. As you look at the world around you, and as you look inside your own mind, there’s a lot of insecurity. There’s a lot of change, a lot of things that are unreliable, especially in your own mind. In fact, that’s the most dangerous of all the unreliable things in the world. The mind can be so quick to reverse itself that the Buddha said there’s no adequate analogy for how quick it is. You’re practicing, and all of a sudden the mind switches directions and says, “No more, enough.” It can all be very arbitrary. Sometimes it’s because the practice is going very well. You decide, “This is good enough. I’ll content myself with this.” Other times, you switch because it’s *not* going well. You put in a lot of effort and you’re not satisfied with the results. Instead of looking inside and saying, “There still must be something wrong in what I’m doing,” you decide that there’s something wrong with the Dhamma.

So this quality of the mind that’s so unreliable is really scary. You can make up your mind to do a lot of good because you want to help the world. But if the mind switches on you, what are you going to do then? We see this with a lot of people who are very corrupt, and yet they seem to have a lot of success in life. You have to assume that they must have made some good kamma in the past, but someplace along the line their minds switched. This is why the practice of straightening out your mind and making it reliable is good not only for you, but also for the world around you.

After all, if you can’t trust yourself, how can anybody else trust you? You’ve got to make yourself trustworthy, reliable, for *sure*. Part of that is learning to develop the determination that you’re not going to give up until you actually find something deathless inside, something that doesn’t change, something that really

is secure, harbor, refuge, unbinding. Once you've had a taste of that, it really changes everything in the mind. It rearranges the geography inside. What seemed to be just a nice idea suddenly becomes a reality, a very *real* reality: the sort of thing that can't be forgotten.

Having a glimpse of that doesn't mean that you're totally there yet, because you also realize there's more work to be done. But from that point on, the Buddha says you're a person who's *for sure*, a *niyata* person, someone who's certain. Up until that point, you're *aniyata*: uncertain. You should use that thought as a spur to practice. Think of the Buddha's determination that he wouldn't let himself rest content with skillful qualities until they had delivered him someplace that really was certain.

The other secret to his awakening—which he doesn't mention that much but is implicit in the story—was his ability to self-correct, to observe himself. He'd be perfectly honest with himself about what he was doing and the results he was getting. If he wasn't getting the results he wanted, he'd ask: "Okay, what am I doing wrong?" He'd tried to find some way around that impasse. We read about the mistakes he made along the way, but they were always followed by his ability to stop and take stock. That's one of the character traits you want to develop as a meditator and in your practice as a whole: the ability to step back and observe yourself, to learn to provide what you need to keep going.

Instead of getting into a mood and riding it wherever it's going to go, you have to step back and ask: "Where is this going to take me?" By now we should have enough familiarity with our moods so that we realize they can't all be relied on. But it's not just a matter of stepping back and watching. It's also learning how to self-correct, to listen to yourself and ask yourself: "Okay, where's the mistake in my reasoning here? Where's the mistake in the narrative that I'm telling here? What can I do to counteract that?" That's where you really see discernment in action.

It's like learning how to be a tightrope walker. People good at walking across a tightrope occasionally look like they're going to lose their balance, but then they can recover. Their ability to recover is what makes the difference. You can't expect them to just glide across the tightrope, because after all they have two legs, they have two feet that have to step one after the other. They can't just inch, inch, inch

along the way. They have to lean a bit to the left, lean a bit to the right to get the feet around. But they also have to know how far they can lean, and if they do lean a little bit too far, how to get back into alignment.

That's the kind of skill you need as a meditator. This is where having that notion of a committee inside is really useful. You have to learn which members of the committee are more reliable than the others. Get them so that they're observing one another. Get them to *spy* on one another: Think of it that way. But it's spying not just so that they can go reporting misbehavior, but also so that they can come up with a solution. Whoever's in charge of the committee meeting right now may be taking you to the wrong place. If they are, have the other members of the committee get together and say: "We've got to change course." Learn how to have some rules of order in your internal conversation. Learn how to have balancing factions. That way, even though know the mind may still be uncertain and hasn't reached a point of certainty, still it can self-correct.

This is how and why we use our powers of judgment: not to put a final stamp of *yes* or *no* on ourselves, but to watch the work that we're doing and to catch mistakes before they amplify. If you see the mind beginning to turn around and leave the practice, find some way of turning it back. After all, this is a difficult practice we've got here. If it were easy, everybody would've glided to nibbana a long time ago.

The Buddha saw that when people are born after they've passed away, it's like a stick being thrown up in the air: Sometimes it lands on this end, sometimes it lands on that end, sometimes it lands splat in the middle. Even though rebirth is determined by your actions, your actions tend to be all over the place. So, the intentions that can come barging through at the moment of death, and opportunities the mind has to choose from, can all look pretty random from outside.

But there is that quality we have, the ability to observe ourselves, which is why we have the ability to do things in the present moment that shape our present moment experience. That principle of causality in which some of the things we're experiencing right now come from the past, but some come from the present: That's our potential rescuer, but all too often it's a wild card. You suddenly get it in your head to go one direction and then suddenly go in another direction. That's

where freedom has as its toll: the ability to make huge mistakes. If we didn't have freedom of choice, if everything were predetermined, we'd all be following the machine as it took us to wherever the universe wanted. But that's not how causality works. We've got influences coming in from our past actions, but we've got this potential for freedom here in the present moment to choose among those influences, so a lot of the practice is learning how to choose wisely.

You have to realize that just because there may be a tendency in the mind that seems to be leading you off the path doesn't mean that you're committed to going in that direction. We have this strange set of values under which, when something unskillful comes in, we fall under its power and feel that we're committed to it, that we have to see it all the way through. Whereas with the path, we don't feel quite so committed.

You have to ask yourself what's wrong with your mind that it feels committed to unskillful things when it can't commit to what's really skillful. Part of the reason is that what's unskillful is a lot easier. But it's easier only in the doing. It's going to entail a lot of trouble down the line. So one of the voices that you need to listen to is the one that's asking: "What are the long-term consequences going to be? Where is this going to lead?" A lot of times you know it's going to lead down, and still you go with it. You have to ask: Why? What's in the mind? What's gotten into you?

So again, think of the committee. You've got lots of different voices in there, so look for the wise ones, look for the ones who are concerned about long-term consequences. Understand that the most dangerous thing in the world is your own mind—the most dangerous thing you're responsible for is your own mind. It's not the case that you're the only one who will suffer if the mind changes direction. Other people will suffer, too. But if you can straighten out your own mind, other people will benefit.

So this is not a selfish practice. It focuses on what you're doing, it focuses on your happiness, but with a realization that there's a ripple effect. Each of us is a causal node, you might say, making decisions freely in the present moment that send out ripples, and feeling the ripples of other people's decisions. We can't get into other people and make their choices for them. Each person has to be

responsible for his or her own choices. Which means that we have to be very responsible for our own.

So keep your hands firmly on the controls and try to take advantage of the fact that you do have this freedom of choice in the present moment. Try to use it wisely because if you're wise in how you use it, it can lead you to a state of security. You don't know that for sure until you get there, but at least it's a possibility, and we live in this world where so many things try to deny that possibility. We have to actively resist their influence and respect our desire for a genuine refuge, and our sense of responsibility inside.

So don't abandon the path now that you've found it. You want to see it all the way through.