

It's What You Give

August 22, 2022

Manopubbaṅgamā manosetṭhā manomayā: Phenomena are preceded by the mind, excelled by the mind, made by the mind. The people who put that statement first in the Dhammapada knew what they were doing, because it expresses a principle that holds all the way through the practice: The mind comes first; the heart comes first.

We live in a world where we have to put a lot of energy in. It's through the energy the mind puts in that we reap the results, good or bad, depending on the energy. To begin with, this is a refutation of the principle of materialism, which is that the mind is just an epiphenomenon of material processes—or, in other words, that it's the result, it's on the far end of the causal spectrum, whereas the real causes are material. Somehow matter happens to be aware, but the matter is doing all the acting, not the awareness. The awareness is just coming along for the ride. That's the material hypothesis.

The Buddha's saying the opposite. The mind is what's doing the acting. Physical processes may have their laws, but their laws are malleable, and you can learn how to shape your experience of the physical and mental world through your intentions. Which is why we're sitting here meditating.

We're not dosing the body with chemicals or magnetic waves to create a state of mind from without. We're changing the mind from within, starting with our desire to escape suffering, and then trying to take that desire seriously, and working on it well.

We have to realize that a lot of the issue has to do with what we're putting into the system. This means that, as you begin the practice and you see other people having an easier time than you are, you should tell yourself that they must have put some good things someplace into the system in the past.

This applies not only to the practice, but also to everything in life. We see people having a really easy time. It seems like they don't have to put much energy in, and they get a lot of results back. But you can't resent them; you can't be jealous of them. They put the energy in sometime in the past, and if they're lazy now, it's a sign they've stopped producing and they're going back to the old consuming mode. If they're not careful, they'll eat up all of their merit, eat up all the goodness they put in the system, and then they'll be back at square one.

So, if you're facing difficulties in the practice, just remind yourself that you must have some bad karma someplace. You may have put some bad things into the system in the past, but here you have the opportunity to put nothing but good things in. That's what the practice is all about: taking your input into the system and making it a gift.

It starts with generosity.

This is why the Buddha starts his teaching with generosity. He's pointing to the fact that what you put into the system is going to make a difference. So, as an example, he starts with something really simple, really basic: the simple act of giving a gift.

Then he moves on to virtue. Here, too, he has you regard virtue as a gift. It's a gift of safety. He says if you can make your virtue universal—you're not going to harm anyone anywhere—then you have a share in that universal safety. You will get some goodness back, but what's important is what you put in.

Then the same principle applies to the meditation.

Some people come in and say, "Prove to me first that this is going to work, and then I'll do it." Well, there's nothing on earth where they can prove things to you before you've done them. Or if they tell you they can, you have to wonder about how honest they are.

The Buddha's upfront about the fact this is going to require work on your part. Some of his teachings he says he can't prove to you, aside from giving a pragmatic proof: that if you take his teachings, say, on karma and rebirth as working hypotheses, you're going to put better things into the system, because you realize that your actions will have long-term consequences.

Think about the images of that first verse of the Dhammapada: If you've been putting bad thoughts, bad deeds, and bad words into the system, it's like having to drag a cart behind you. The cart is heavy, and its wheels will crush the footprints you leave behind. In other words, whatever good you try to do will get crushed by the bad things you've done.

Whereas if you put good things into the system, it's like having a shadow follow you. A shadow has no weight at all. It's no burden on you to walk along with a shadow. And goodness is even better than a shadow in the sense that it provides you with protection.

So it really does matter what you put in.

This requires energy, which is one of the reasons why we develop strengths: strength of conviction, strength of persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. We can find the sources of these strengths within. When we hear the Buddha's teachings, they make sense,

but it's up to us to make that movement of the heart, which is conviction. We have to give our assent, take on these principles as working hypotheses, and then put forth our effort.

Think of what the Buddha said when he said the doors to the deathless are open: "Let those with ears show their conviction." You have to put energy in, you have to give the gift of conviction for this to work.

The same with persistence: It's all about the effort you put in. This is one of the reasons why the Thai ajaans don't explain everything. Ajaan Fuang once commented that when you practice, you have to think like a thief. The ajaan isn't going to explain everything. When he does things that you don't understand, you have to ask yourself, "Well, what could be a good reason for doing that?" You have to put your energy into figuring things out, because after all, that's how you have to approach the meditation. You can get the most detailed instructions as possible on meditation, and still they wouldn't be detailed enough.

Ajaan Lee said that he could write a huge treatise on meditation, and still it wouldn't cover all the ins and outs of the mind. So the parts that aren't covered in the instructions, you have to figure out: "Which principles in the instructions apply here, and how should I apply them?" You've got to be willing to put some energy in, to try to figure this out, to experiment.

So, the model of the teaching and learning experience here is that ideally the student should want to learn and be willing to put forth effort. That's how you learn how to figure things out. The same with mindfulness, concentration, discernment: It's what you put into it that makes all the difference.

With the discernment, you have to ask questions. Your mind gets into concentration, things are very still and very pleasant, and you could just sit there. But as Ajaan Mahā Boowa says, it's like getting all the raw materials for a house gathered together and then just sitting on the raw materials. You don't get the house; they don't give you any shelter. You have to ask, "What's this for? What's that for? Why does the mind do this? Why does the mind do that?"

Think of the Buddha in his quest for awakening. He tried out various things. It wasn't that he would go to a teacher, and say, *Hand me your attainment*. He said, *Teach me what you've got to teach, and I'll go and put it into practice*. Then, when he put it into practice, he discovered it didn't work even though he had tried his best. As he said, he put forth conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. Then when he had given what he could and realized that this wouldn't lead him any further than, say, a state of

concentration, he moved on. He asked himself, “What else could there be? What other path could there be? What else can I do?”

That was how he gained, ultimately, the discernment as to what the path was, and how to follow it—and he gained the results. In gaining the results, he learned a lot about the mind. He saw that what we bring to our sensory experience is what makes all the difference.

You look at dependent co-arising: The big factors are prior to sensory contact: fabrication, name and form, intentions, acts of attention, perceptions, feelings, even the way you breathe. This is what you bring to sensory contact, and what you bring is going to make the difference between whether it’s going to be a cause for suffering or part of the path to the end of suffering.

So this principle of the mind comes first goes from the simple act of giving a gift—putting some food in a monk’s bowl, say, or giving your time, giving of your knowledge—all the way to the *giving back* in the third noble truth. *Cago patinissaggo*: giving up, giving back, all those things you’ve laid claim to as yours. When the path has completed its work, you give everything back, including the path itself.

This is an image you see throughout the forest ajaans’ teachings. You realize that you’ve laid claim to things that really weren’t yours, and you finally surrender them and give them their freedom. That’s the *mutti* in the third noble truth.

So, it’s giving from the very beginning to the very end, because when you do this properly, then there’s total release. That’s the point where you can stop the giving because you’re no longer needing to take anything.

Think of that statement by Luang Pu Dune, that the things of the world come in pairs—there’s giving and taking—but the Dhamma is one thing clear through. It’s giving all the way.

The various strengths we develop are there to help us keep on giving, and not to get resentful when we see other people going faster than we are, or attaining something we don’t yet have. Because it’s not what you *get* out of life that’s going to be important, it’s what you give.

The Buddha’s giving you lessons in how to give in a way where you don’t have to give for a while and then get worn out from the giving, and then just take, take, take, taking what you can—because that pulls you back down. He’s showing you how to keep on giving, how to sustain this attitude through the strength of your conviction and persistence, gaining the nourishment from your concentration, until finally, you can give everything up and gain the greatest reward: release. It’s not something you take. It’s simply there.

So try to maintain this attitude that you're willing to give. You have the desire to learn, so you're going to give the energy that's needed to learn. Then you try to depend on these strengths, develop these strengths, to carry you all the way through.