

The Need for Agency

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When you look at the Buddha's sixteen steps for breath meditation, you see that in every case he's telling you to *do* something. In fact, you *train* yourself to do something: You very consciously look at your actions to see whether they're in line with what the Buddha recommended, and if not, how you can change them. This is a point that seems so obvious that you wonder why you would have to mention it.

But there are a lot of people out there who teach some very strange things about meditation: that it's not a *doing* at all. Some of them explain this idea by saying there is no self, therefore there's nobody doing anything. There are just causes and conditions, and you simply get out of the way to allow them to do their own thing.

This evening I heard a new twist on this theme: that trying to interfere with the way things do their own thing is clinging, so if you stop interfering, there'll be no clinging, and therefore no suffering. Now, there is a point in the practice where you apply the perception of not-self to everything to let go of everything. Some people feel that if that's where we're going, we might as well start out with that. But you can't start out with that. You're actually suffering, no matter how much you say you aren't. There has to be a sense of you doing the path here before the path can take you to the point where you no longer need a "you." Until then, you're the one who's responsible for following the path. This is why the Buddha says, "The self is its own mainstay."

It's as if people had the cheat sheet on the enlightenment test, and they knew all the right answers: Question 1 is answered with 'B,' question 2 is answered with 'A,' and so on. They know all the letters for the multiple choices, but they don't really know what the questions are, and they don't know what the letter for the answers represent, either.

If you're going to gain any discernment, you have to look at what you're doing, see where you're causing stress—and then you can change. Some of the change comes from what other people tell you to do. Some of it has to come from your own powers of observation because *your* discernment is the factor that's going to make the difference. You can borrow other people's discernment for a bit, but a lot of it depends on your own sensitivity to what you're doing, and to the results you're getting from what you're doing.

That's how the Buddha talks about his own quest for awakening: He tried this, he did this, he developed these qualities, and then he saw that the results were lacking. So he figured, "What else could I do?" He went to two teachers and put their teachings to the test by putting them into practice. He didn't get the results he wanted, even though he had completed that practice to the satisfaction of the teachers—but it wasn't to his own satisfaction.

So he tried self-torment. That didn't work, either. Then he finally got onto the right path. It was all through trial and error, taking responsibility for his actions, and then when things didn't turn out right, trying to figure out other ways he could do things.

Now, if you think the practice is not something you *do*, you're going to miss that opportunity. And who's the you who's doing it? The Buddha doesn't talk too much about that. You already have a you; all he's asking is that whatever "you" you have, it's part of a state of becoming you've developed, so train it to be competent, train it to be *confident* that you can do this.

That's what the teachings on conceit that Ven. Ananda gave to that nun one time are all about: "Other people can do this. They're human beings. I'm a human being. If they can do it, why can't I?"

We ultimately try to get rid of the conceit, but we have to learn how to use it skillfully first. The same with craving: It's okay to crave awakening. Other people have done it. The fact that they've done it—there's that *news* that they've done it—and you have a desire to have what they've got: It's not that you're going to take away what they've got, but you want to have that same attainment. That's a craving that keeps you on the path.

So, throughout the practice, it's a matter of doing things, *using* things, that you will then have to overcome. You use your sense of self that at some point you'll have to put aside. But you do that first through using that sense of self as agent so that you can really get to know the principle of karma.

As you're sitting here right now, there are some things appearing in the mind caused by what you're doing right now; other things appearing in the mind are a result of past actions. So, there are some things that are happening in the mind that you don't take responsibility for right now because they come from past actions and can't be changed, but you do take responsibility for what you do with them. You're sitting here focusing on the breath. Other thoughts may come into the mind, but for the time being you say, "Nope, not going there."

You do your best to make the breath interesting and to make the skill of meditation interesting—to get some satisfaction, not only out of the comfort of the breath, but also out of the fact that you've developed some skills and you can

use them. There's a real pleasure that comes from mastering a skill. It's not the same as simply having a pleasant sensation. There's a real sense of joy in agency.

I mentioned the other day that case of the psychologist who was observing infants, and noticed that one of the things that makes them happiest is if they see they can do something and get a result, and they can repeat it and get the same result. They've realized they've figured something out: You do this action, you get that result. That sense of agency, that sense of figuring out cause and effect, makes them really happy.

On the other hand, you can think about people in depression: It usually comes from a sense that they've lost their agency. They've tried, tried, tried to find happiness, but they've been stymied in every direction, so they just give up.

So a sense of agency is something that really gives happiness to the mind. What we're doing in the practice is to take that quest for agency and to use it really well—to develop it as a skill. There's a sense of the *you* who can do these things, the *you* who's trying to benefit from them, and the *you* who comments on what you've done, notices the patterns, and then begins to judge: What kinds of actions really are worth doing? Which ones are not?

Now, for the most part, we've created a lot of suffering that way: things that seemed to give rise to happiness but ultimately didn't. Or, whatever happiness they give rise to stays for a while, laughs in your face, and runs away—and then you're left with the suffering.

So, the Buddha's not saying, "Just give up." That would put you into a depression. He's saying, "Be more observant. Be clearer about what you're doing and the results you're getting." He gives you some advice as to where to focus your actions, what kinds of actions to master. But then he says that a lot of it is up to you.

This is why he asks for people who are honest and observant. It's also why he said that the Dhamma is nourished by commitment and reflection: You commit to doing it, and then you reflect on the results of what you've done. Then you take your reflections and use them to inform your next action, and your next.

Pursue this as a skill because it's through pursuing these skills—the skills of mindfulness, the skills of concentration—that you really get to know the principle of karma. After all, we're working on a type of karma here that's really special. The Buddha says there's bright karma, there's dark karma, there's a mixture of the two, and then there's karma that's neither bright nor dark: It's the karma that leads to the end of karma.

You're not going to put an end to karma without understanding it, without understanding the principle of cause and effect, and seeing exactly how far your agency can go.

So, instead of having you simply accept that you can't do anything and be okay with that and dress it up so that you forget that it is a kind of mild depression—or sometimes a severe depression—he has you take that process of delighting in your agency, and he says, “Pursue it, but use it to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities and to delight in developing skillful qualities.”

That's the practice of delight that he recommends. He said this is how people put an end to the effluents: You delight in the Dhamma, you delight in abandoning, you delight in developing, you delight in seclusion. You delight in the unafflicted, a term for *nibbāna*, indicating that it's totally free from any limitation or disturbance. Before you get to the unafflicted, you delight in the idea of that: that your actions can take you to such a place. You delight in non-objectification: the kind of thinking that's able to avoid conflict. You delight in the idea that you can find something that's totally conflict-free.

So, you're taking your delight in agency, and you're applying it in the direction of delighting in the path that will take you to the end of the effluents. But this requires that you actually know the questions and you know the answers.

You realize the question about self and not-self is not whether there is or is not a self—you've already assumed one, so you might as well use it. But there will come a point, as you get to see things more and more in terms of actions and their results, that you see your sense of self as a kind of action. And you begin to notice, “When is it skillful? When is it not?” Eventually that pursuit will take you to the point where the perception of not-self does get applied to everything.

In other words, you've answered that question, *What when I do it will lead to my long term welfare and happiness?* That's the question. And the answer is found in *doing* the practice—committing yourself to it and reflecting on it. This is something the enlightenment cheat sheet can't tell you.

So, it requires commitment. A lot of people don't like to hear that. They'd rather hear that they don't have to do anything and they can be enlightened. But that's depressing. The Buddha's teaching you a path that leads to the highest happiness. And you do that by first by pursuing the happiness you can find through perfecting that sense of agency—that you really can make a difference.

So, instead of seeing the attempts to make a difference in things simply as clinging that you've got to abandon, you learn how to be really skillful in how you make a difference in things. Then you reach the point where you can let go of that sense of agency—the voice inside that's telling you what to do.

At this point, it's not going to be depressing. The depressing way of abandoning agency is when you get on the raft, then you get off right away, and you just sit there. You've gone one foot away from the shore on this side, and then you just sit there soaking in the water. Which is very different from taking the raft all the way across, and then reaching the point where you don't need the raft anymore because you've reached the freedom of the other side.

So, this is a path to delight in. And the delight comes from that sense of agency—perfected to the point where you don't need it anymore. It's taken you to the happiness you want. After all, that's what agency is all about: You want to find happiness. The situation where you are right now is not happy, or it may be happy in some ways, but it's not satisfying. You want to find something better. And the Buddha says there really *is* something better, and it's something that you can reach through your power of action—which is why this is a path of delight.

So, don't listen to the people who would like to hand out an enlightenment cheat sheet at the door. You really want to master the skills of the path. That's the only way you're going to arrive at real answers and find the real thing.