

## *Why It's Good to Know Why*

*February 10, 2023*

I saw a title for a Dhamma talk recently—it was kind of scary. It was called, “You don’t have to know why. Just know it’s like this.” I can’t see the Buddha giving a Dhamma talk or a sutta with that title. After all, he started out his explanation of his awakening with the principle of causality explaining why things are the way they are. It’s because of ignorance that we fashion our experience. And because we’re doing it in ignorance, we fashion it in unskillful ways. But we can bring some knowledge to it. It’s because we know why we’re doing things wrong that we can start doing things right. We’re not just here to bear witness to things and let them go.

After all, we are responsible for shaping our experience, both through our past actions that send their influence into our present experience, in the form of the six senses, and then through our present intentions that actually shape that raw material coming in from the past in a good or bad way. So why should we keep on doing things in a bad way and just witness it? We learn about things, we learn about cause and effect, by trying to do things as skillfully as possible.

This is why we practice concentration. We’re going to be learning about our intentions, the power of our intentions, and our power to shape them in the right direction. The Thai translation for the Pali word *samadhi*—*tang jai man*—literally means establishing the mind firmly, or establishing the heart firmly. But it can also mean being really intent on what you’re doing, firmly intent on what you’re doing.

The best way to learn about intentions is to set up an intention, intend to maintain it, and then see what happens. Of course, you’re going to run into other intentions. You wouldn’t notice them if you weren’t firm in your original intention. Everything would flow into everything else. You’d find yourself thinking this, thinking that, finding yourself in bad mind states and saying, “Gee, I wonder how I got here.” If there’s a good mind state, you don’t know how it got there, either. You want to know why.

So set up the intention. While you’re sitting here meditating, set up the intention to stay with the breath and then strengthen that intention by making the breath as comfortable as possible, so that the mind will be happy to be here, and, if it loses its focus, you’ll be happy to come back when you realize you’ve lost focus.

Then you notice the voices in the mind that would rather do something else. You can ask yourself, “Why listen to them when it feels so good to be with the breath?” If the breath is not comfortable, it’s very easy to tell yourself, “Well, those other intentions might be a better way to find happiness. Let’s follow them.”

But you can strengthen your original intention by taking an interest in the breath, finding joy not only just in the physical sensation of comfortable breathing, but also in the mastery of a skill, figuring things out, trying to find out why. Why does the mind go for unskillful things? What does it think it’s going to get out of them? And how can you replace them with something better?

The same principle applies as you go through daily life. You can make your intention to have goodwill for everybody you encounter, every situation you encounter, the people you like, the people you don’t like. Remember that line toward the end of the Karaniya Metta Sutta: “to be determined on this mindfulness.” After all, goodwill is not necessarily the natural state of the mind. Goodwill is easy in some cases and not easy in others. Ill will can be just as easy in some cases and not in others. Your mind can go either way. So you have to determine to remember to bring an attitude of goodwill if you want it to develop and grow.

Then see which parts of the mind go against that determination. Remember that goodwill includes compassion and empathetic joy. In other words, you wish for happiness. When you see that people around you, the beings around you, are not happy, you feel compassion for them and ask yourself, “Is there anything I can do to help them find happiness?”

As for people who are already happy, you want to be happy for them. Don’t resent their happiness. Don’t be envious. Regard it as a test for your genuine goodwill. You go around saying, “May all beings be happy, may all beings be happy,” yet then you hear somebody who’s happy, but they’re happy in a way that seems to overshadow your happiness: Can you still say, “May this person continue to be happy”? If you resent the fact that people are happy, then what kind of goodwill is that? So you do this both as a test for your mind to understand your intentions, and also to make sure that you actually act in ways that are skillful.

Sometimes we get the mind into a bad state and we feel that we have the right to be in the bad state if we want to. Nobody’s going to force us not to. But you’re off the path. An attitude that somehow you’ll benefit by letting yourself stay in a bad state, or think that it’s your real set of emotions about a particular instance, and it keeps you off the path, it’s wrong view. It’s unskillful. You’re doing yourself harm. You extend goodwill to others because you want to have goodwill for

yourself. You want to be able to do things, say things, think things, that will have a good effect if you really have goodwill for yourself.

So try to make this an intention that you maintain and then do what you can to strengthen the intention. Remember that when you're extending thoughts of goodwill, you're not saying, "May you be happy just as you are." The thought is, "May you understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them." And see that as a real possibility.

We tend to dismiss other people: "So and so is like this, so and so is like that. This person likes me, that person doesn't like me. I can't get along with this person, can't get along with that person." You put them in a box. Having goodwill for others means that you try to open up the box and think of other people not as set identities but as possibilities—and you're trying to think in terms of their good possibilities. When you do that, you benefit. It gives you new ideas of how you might interact with other people that you might not have thought of before. In that way, you expand yourself as a person.

All too often we have the attitude "Well, I'm the sort of person I am and this is the way I think and this is the way I act. This is me." Well, the Buddha says, however you define yourself, it's going to be a limitation. Do you want to go around your whole life with those limitations? Well, no. So try things out.

Number one in the lessons in the Buddha's teachings and in his life is that people can be unpredictable. A young prince, living a life of luxury: It would be easy to predict that he'd stay in that life of luxury, maybe come into power as he got older, wage a couple of wars, die, go to wherever people who wage wars go when they die. But he didn't. He stopped and he reflected: "Is this all there is to life? Maybe there should be something more." So he did unpredictable things. It was rare for a prince in those days to go out and take up the life of a wanderer, but he did that. It's rare for someone not to be waylaid, say, when he studies with a teacher, masters what the teacher had to teach, and then is offered a teaching position, not to take that teaching position. But he went on and said, "There must be more."

He gained his knowledges on the night of his awakening. There have been people who gained knowledge of previous lives, gained knowledge of people dying and being reborn, and they stop there. They set themselves up as teachers of rebirth, teachers of karma. But the Buddha kept asking, "What do I want? I want freedom." That's unpredictable. But he was able to stick to his search and to find what he was looking for.

So allow yourself to be unpredictable in a good way. And think of other people as having the opportunity to be unpredictable in a good way, too. See what your

interactions toward them can do to help you in that direction, help them in that direction. That casts a whole new light on what our life together here can be. In this way, you learn the power of intention. It can take you to places that you wouldn't have imagined before.

Remember that the mind is a complex system. And the nature of complex systems is that they're focused on some things, but then, in the areas where they're not focused, they tend to be pretty random. When we get on the path, we're focusing ourselves in a particular direction. We're trying to get all those random threads of the mind to work in that direction. We can make something more of ourselves than we might have expected. We can do this through our intentions and through learning to understand our intentions. The Buddha sets down the path for us to follow. But as I said last night, it's an unusual path, in that you follow it and you also create it in yourself. You develop it in yourself at the same time.

This is the power of your intention. And this is where you find that your intentions play a bigger and bigger role, because you're giving them a focused goal. You've firmly establishing your mind, firmly establishing your intent. You protect that focus and you'll be surprised at how far it can take you. It's only when you teach yourself to look at the world in a new way, and act in a new way, that you're going to find new things. Otherwise, it's just the same old stuff over and over and over again. You have to ask yourself: Haven't you had enough? There is better. And you can attain something better if you learn to figure out why things are happening in the mind, and how you can change.

So we're not just here looking at things as they are and saying, "Gee, this is like this, or that's the way this is." That gets old pretty fast. If you figure out *why* things are the way they are, then you can shape them in a much better direction. So the *why* is necessary. And the Buddha lays it out for you. He's done a lot of the exploring for you, so you'd be wise to take advantage of what he can teach you. He points you in the right direction. It's up to you to follow his recommendations and explore the direction in which he points you.

There's that famous passage where someone asks him, "Why is it that you teaches people and some people gain the goal and other people don't?" The Buddha's response is, "It's like giving directions to somebody to go to Rajagaha. You tell them to turn here, turn there. But if they don't follow your directions, what are you going to do? All the Buddha can do is point the way." He's given us enough explanation to understand where in the mind we should look, what we should do to develop the mind in the proper direction. But for that to become genuine knowledge, we have to follow the directions ourselves, commit ourselves

to what he's taught us, reflect on what we're doing, so that the path becomes our path—because we've done our best to take his explanation of why and use it to our advantage—coming to understand why there's suffering, and how we can stop—on our own.