

Don't Limit Yourself

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When you define yourself, you limit yourself. This is why the Buddha discouraged people from asking that question, “Who am I?” or “What am I?” Because not only is the answer irrelevant to the practice, oftentimes it can get in the way of your actually being motivated to do the practice, and understanding what you're doing.

If you define yourself as ones and zeroes, there's an awful lot that ones and zeroes can't do. They can't know the Deathless. They're bits of information, they're not anything that knows anything. If you define yourself as part of one larger Oneness, can you make choices? Is the Oneness going to make the choices for you?

You go down all the long list of different ways that people identify themselves, define themselves, and there's always some limitation.

So as the Buddha said, put those questions aside. Focus on what you're doing and what you *can* do. And how do you know what you can do unless you explore it? The Buddha gives you some exercises to get started, to get the mind trained so that it can watch itself and also expand its range of abilities.

The more consistently mindful you are—in other words, the longer you can keep something in mind—the more you'll be able to put things together and understand cause and effect, as you remember how particular causes happened and you can trace it all the way through to the effect coming out.

So we work on mindfulness.

As for concentration, you keep your focus. With concentration, you're trying to keep your focus going as long as possible. And again, it enables you to see things you didn't see before. It gives strength to the mind, gives a sense of well-being to the mind. You start knowing things about the mind that you didn't think you could know.

Now, for a long time, as I was getting started with concentration practice, I thought it was impossible to observe the mind being distracted. All you could see, I thought, was what you're focused on, and distraction came as a sudden pulling down of a curtain. So the question was, how could you know yourself being distracted? Then I began to see that you can see the stages: This is how the mind sneaks in a new topic, and then the new topic begins to get more and more frequent and then finally it takes over. When you see that, then you can stop that.

This enables you to see more and more clearly how thoughts form. And to

what extent things coming up in the mind are intended right now, which things were intended from the past, and which things are things you can't remember the intention at all. You start sorting out present karma from recent karma, and both from long-time-ago karma.

The word karma means action. Even the word Dhamma has, as one of its meanings, action. So we're focusing on actions. We're trying to expand our ability and see what good use we can put them to.

One very good use is to notice ways in which we're creating unnecessary stress and suffering for ourselves and for other people, and to learn how to stop. In fact, as the Buddha said, that's *the* primary good use of the meditation.

So this is what we're here for, to understand what we're doing that's causing unnecessary suffering, how we can stop, and what happens as a result of learning how to stop. It opens up some really fascinating dimensions in the mind, dimensions that we tend to ignore because we're too concerned with our intentions right now, what we want right now, our desires, and all the stuff that just goes cluttering up the mind, all the issues we dig up around who-knows-what.

This is why, as part of the meditation instructions, the Buddha says for you to put aside greed and distress with reference to the world: in other words, what you want out of the world and what you're unhappy about not getting out of the world. You learn to put that aside. The issue is not the world. The issue is what your mind is doing right now. We're not saying the world is good or the world is bad, just that it's not the issue.

Ordinarily, we just keep going and going and going, creating more and more stress and suffering for ourselves because we're out there craving this, that and the other thing out of the world. So we get some training in how to put it aside, learn how to change our ranking of values so that we see the value of training of the mind and learning about the abilities of the mind that can be developed. See if you can make that your primary interest, give that priority. As for issues that get in the way of that, learn how to put them aside.

As we live in the world, we have our responsibilities, and there are times we have to pick up those responsibilities. But again, we need to develop a sense of which are our responsibilities and which are not. The Buddha said that that's a sign of a wise person: knowing what you're responsible for and what you're not responsible for, taking up your responsibilities and leaving behind the things that you're not responsible for.

Unfortunately, there's no clear-cut algorithm that you can apply. But you do have this ability to make your mind more and more sensitive through the meditation. And then you can learn how to apply that sensitivity to events in the

world.

Remember the Buddha's perspective on this: that we've been going through this many, many, many times. As he said, as you go through the world, it would be really hard to find somebody who hadn't been your mother at some point, hadn't been your child at some point, hadn't been your brother or sister, hadn't been your father. You've been doing this for such a long time that all the roles get all mixed up.

So the best thing for everybody is to learn how to get out of this. It's just like being in a washing machine. Everything gets tumbled around. But the big difference is that a washing machine actually accomplishes something—it cleans things—while this just keeps stirring things around and around and around, and nothing really goes anywhere. There are good things but then there are bad things. And there are more good things; there are more bad things.

Now, one of the motivations for training the mind is to see: How much good can you do consistently? And you find that true good finally leads you out of the cycle entirely.

So work on your intention right now, because that's the essence of what you're doing. And see how skillful you can make those intentions. As the Buddha said, you do this by, on the one hand, not doing anything that you anticipate would cause harm. And then, two, actually watch the actions you think will be harmless to see if they cause any problem either immediately while you're doing them or after they're done. That's how you train your discernment.

It may start out with trial and error, trial and error. But after a while, by being willing to learn from your errors, it turns into trial and success. As you get more and more sensitive to what you're doing, to what your intentions are, and as you work on trying to be as skillful as possible, you expand your range.

That's the important thing about the practice: It expands the range of what you can do—to the point where you get where you don't really care about defining yourself as to what you are, because what you've found that what you do is so much more valuable. The deathless is there as a dimension, and it can be touched through the mind by developing the path. And it is the end of suffering. It's the end of all the things that we do that would lead to happiness but carry some stress, either for ourselves or other people. It's a happiness that doesn't involve any doing at all. In fact, it's the end of doing.

This is one of the ironies of all this, is that you focus on what you're doing so you get really sensitive to what you're doing until you get to the point where you find a happiness that doesn't require any doing at all. It's found when you stop doing. But you can't really stop doing unless you're sensitive to what you *are*

doing.

So that's what we're focusing on right now: What are you doing right now? Well, trying to be with your breath—and finding that you're not only trying but you're actually doing it, for the purpose of finding out what you can learn about your own mind, what you can learn about your capabilities as you master this skill.