

Commit & Reflect

November 15, 2021

There's a fairly obscure sutta where the Buddha makes an important statement. He says that the Dhamma is to be gained through two things: commitment and reflection. You commit yourself to the practice and then you watch. In other words, you don't simply watch whatever is going to come up in the mind. You watch the mind as it's actually trying to give rise to skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones. Of course, the two processes go together because as you develop more and more skillful qualities, you'll be able to see things more clearly, reflect with more wisdom, more discernment.

If we apply this way of looking at the Dhamma—to, say, the five faculties—we see how this is so. You start out with conviction. You take as working hypothesis the principle that the Buddha really was awakened and you think about the lessons of his awakening, how they apply to you. When the Buddha talks about conviction, he's talking about three things: who you believe, what you believe, and what you do in response.

In this case, we believe the noble ones, headed by the Buddha himself. In terms of his awakening, we believe that he gained awakening through his own efforts, so what he learned about the principle of action is going to be important. He saw that beings were reborn in line with their actions. But it wasn't a very simplistic analysis. He saw there were a lot of actions in any one lifetime—negative ones, positive ones. The ones that had a huge impact were the ones that happened right at the moment of death. In other words, it wasn't just past karma but also present karma acting together that had a huge influence on where you were going to go. So he took that principle and applied it to his mind in the present moment even before death. And he realized, by looking at the present moment in terms of the four noble truths, he could go beyond being reborn.

The implication here is that you want to focus not only on the present moment but also on developing skillful qualities in the present moment, because that's what the four noble truths are all about. You see that you're suffering because of a lack of skill in terms of your craving and ignorance. In fact, the word ignorance means, "lack of skill," in addition to meaning, "not knowing." But you also have the choice of developing the skills of the noble eightfold path and arriving at the end of suffering.

So the choices have to be made. You take as a working hypothesis that they really do make a difference and you want to follow through. That leads to the next faculty, which is persistence or effort. You actively do try to give rise to skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones. Now, with some of those unskillful qualities, all you have to do is watch them and they go away. It's as if they're embarrassed. They thrive in a mind where you're not paying much attention. When you turn your spotlight of your awareness on them, they shrivel up.

But there are other causes of suffering, other unskillful habits of the mind, that when you stare at them, they stare right back. They're not the least bit intimidated. In that case, the Buddha said you have to exert a fabrication. Look at the way you breathe, look at the way you talk to yourself, look at the images you hold in mind, the feelings you focus on. How can you work with these things to undercut the mind's desire to go with those unskillful habits? In other words, you really do have to put forth an effort.

There are very few images in the Canon of people coasting their way across the ocean of suffering into the harbor of nibbana safely without any effort. There are many more images of warriors going into battle, craftspeople trying to develop skills, people in searching for something—in other words, people putting forth effort in order to succeed at something. You do have to invest effort in the practice. But here again, you have to reflect on what you're doing, because brute effort without reflection doesn't get you anywhere.

This is why we have to work specifically on the qualities that allow us to reflect more and more clearly. The first is mindfulness. The way the Buddha teaches mindfulness is not that you just keep things in mind, although that is an important part of it. You keep in mind the fact that you want to work on developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones. You have to keep in mind what you remember of how you've successfully dealt with these things in the past and how you can recognize mental qualities when they're small so that you can deal appropriately with them in time.

But mindfulness also involves alertness—watching what you're doing—and ardency: trying to do this well. You're ardent about being alert and you try to be alert to your ardency. Right there, we see again the combination of commitment and reflection, right in the midst of mindfulness practice.

And what is mindfulness practice for? It's for getting the mind to settle down in right concentration. You have one frame of reference, as when you work on the breath right here. You really try to stick with it because when the mind can stay with one object, it's going to see things a lot more clearly. And it gets nourished at the same time. That helps to keep up the practice. The mind needs its

nourishment, so we look for it in the concentration. As the mind gets still and more nourished, that's when discernment arises, discernment with regard to what you're doing right now, which ties back to your conviction in what the Buddha learned on the night of his awakening—that present karma really does play a huge role in shaping your experience now and on into the future. So you really want to be very careful, very attentive to what you're doing right now.

As you work on getting the mind more and more at ease in the concentration, more and more inclined to want to get into concentration, more skilled at it, you begin to see where there's the craving that causes the suffering, where there's the ignorance that causes suffering. You see where you're putting unnecessary burdens on the mind through your lack of skill. Conviction simply tells you that this is where you look. With discernment, you actually see. And it comes from committing yourself to the heightened mind—in other words, the practice of concentration—and then reflecting on it while you're doing it.

So we're not here just to accept willy-nilly whatever comes up in the mind or simply watch what's coming up in the mind. We have a program; we have an agenda: trying to work on being skilled in developing skillful qualities.

Think of the Buddha's image of the person who wants to get milk out of a cow by twisting the horn. You can twist and twist and twist. You can put a lot of energy in, a lot of effort, but you're not getting any milk. Now, some people say, "Well, just stop twisting. Just be there with the cow. Look at the cow. Accept the cow." If you do that, it's true that you're not wearing yourself out with the effort and you're certainly not harassing the cow, but you're still not getting any milk. You have to realize that there are other parts of the cow that you pull on, other parts that you twist. When you pull on the udder, you get the milk. And you learn that through reflection: looking at your efforts and seeing where they're not bearing any fruit and where they are. We're not saying that effort is bad. Simply that you haven't found the right way to do it.

So we have the desire to do this well. We put in the effort to do it well. That's the commitment part. Then we pay close attention to what we're doing. And we use our ingenuity to figure out when things are going well and why they're going well; when things are not going well, why they're not going well. That's how we arrive at the kind of discernment that really pierces into things. We learn through doing and watching while we're doing it.

Think of Ajaan Lee's many examples of developing a skill: learning how to sew a pair of pants, how to weave a basket, how to make clay tiles. You have to commit yourself to want to do these things and to want to do them well. Then you watch yourself in action. That's how you learn.

It's a longstanding principle that the things you know best are the things you're doing, things that you've done. Our problem is that we don't pay much attention to what we're doing as we go through life and are shaping our experience from moment to moment to moment. But if you want to clearly see it happen, you have to want to try to do it well. If you don't say "No" to your unskillful urges, you simply see them pass, pass, pass but you don't really know why. Why is the mind churning out these unskillful thoughts? What's the allure? You really don't know the allure unless you've thwarted it—by saying "No" and seeing how the mind responds. See who responds in there.

So it's a matter of watching yourself in action—watching yourself in action trying to do something really well. That's how you gain the Dhamma.