

Accepting Yourself

March, 2003

There were a lot of questions, a lot of issues in the time of the Buddha, where people would insist that the answer must be either one alternative or another, but the Buddha's answer was, "Neither." The question was poorly framed; it led nowhere.

Then he would provide a new answer that essentially rephrased the question.

This pattern started with his very first talk. He taught a path that led between the extremes of sensual self-indulgence and self-torture. Those were the two alternatives that many people posited, but the Buddha offered a third alternative: the noble eightfold path. And although we tend to think of the issues of sensual self-indulgence and self-torture as physical issues, they're also mental. We have to recognize that our practice tries to find a middle way between those mental extremes.

For many people, the issue is, "Should I learn to accept myself or should I reject myself?" And the psychologists would say, "Learn to accept yourself." Well, acceptance and rejection of yourself are two extremes. We need to recognize them as extremes and start looking at behavior instead.

There are some people who really *should* be dissatisfied with the way they behave. And then, of course, other people who are too hard on themselves. Their behavior is perfectly okay but they tie themselves up in knots with unrealistic expectations, unrealistic standards—and beating themselves over the head with those expectations and standards.

It's obvious that we shouldn't have unrealistic expectations, but the question is, "At what point do they become unrealistic?" And that's something we've got to learn through trial and error in the practice.

But it helps to focus not so much on your sense of who you are, whether you're a person who should accept yourself or a person who should be upset with yourself, and to look instead at your actions, at your intentions.

The Buddha was so wise in teaching Rahula precisely this issue from the very beginning, because your intentions are something you can know if you really look carefully. There are so many other things in life that you can't know. But this is one thing you can know. And so you work on developing your sense of right and wrong with regard to your intentions—your sense of what's appropriate and what's not appropriate, your sense of what's skillful or not. You're beginning with something you can know, something you can watch in terms of intention and then see what happens as a result of acting on that intention.

When I first went over to Thailand, television had not yet really come to the country. They did have TV stations, and a little village might have one TV set for the whole village: a little black-and-white screen, nothing at that impressive. And the programming was very limited –

just a few hours a day. And the kids I taught at the university seemed to be very comfortable in their own skins.

By the time I'd left, everything had changed. TV was everywhere, huge color TV sets, cable had come, twenty-four hours a day, all kinds of programming. And young people were very dissatisfied with themselves, largely because of advertising on TV.

A lot of this issue of accepting or rejecting yourself comes from the mass media. They prey on our insecurities, trying to make us feel that we lack this, lack that, so that we'll buy whatever they're trying to sell.

So most people, when they come to the practice, come with this problem of self-image. This is why we get a lot of teachings on learning how to accept yourself or how you should realize that you're okay just as you are. Which may be a good antidote for a while, for people who've been overly hard on themselves. But it's not the answer.

If that were the answer, then we would have heard that the Buddha left his palace, went off into the woods, and then came back realizing that he had been perfectly okay as he was when he was still living in the palace. There was no need for him to go off into the forest, no need for him to practice. I have yet to find that teaching anywhere in the Canon.

It's important for the purpose of the practice that we do have a good healthy self-image, a good healthy sense of ourselves. But we have to realize that that's not the issue. The issue is that, even if we do have a healthy sense of ourselves, we're still causing ourselves suffering. And that's not okay.

If you get tied up in the issue of who you are, your self-image, it really gets in the way of looking at your actions and looking at the results and having a dispassionate attitude towards them—dispassion in the sense that you really want to learn what works and what doesn't work. Because it's going to make a big difference in your life. Although you would like your actions to work to get the desired results all the time, you have to be mature enough to realize that that's not always going to happen. There's room for learning.

So you want to know, "If you act on this intention, what are the results? If you act on that intention, what are the results? Are they skillful or not, these intentions you've been acting on? If they're not, can you use your ingenuity to find some other way to act?"

You keep testing, testing, testing like this.

Which requires confidence in your ability to learn. But it doesn't demand that you always make the right choice. You want to try to make the right choice, you want to work for it, but you have to admit that there are a lot of areas in life that you don't know beforehand. And so you don't berate yourself for not knowing the things you can't know.

The areas where you *can* berate yourself are where you know better and yet you still do the things you know you shouldn't be doing.

So it's important to answer this question properly, about how to negotiate between the two extremes of self-acceptance and self-rejection; about learning a healthy attitude toward

learning, a healthy attitude toward looking at your actions and wanting to learn from them—shifting the issue from whether you're acceptable or not acceptable as a person, to looking to the actions, looking at the intentions that come into the mind and that you feel inclined to act on.

Over time, you start developing realistic standards for judging them. Because after all, there are a lot of people in the world right now who are very satisfied with themselves, they're very content with themselves, and they're creating a lot of trouble in the world.

So it's not an issue of learning to accept yourself or not accept yourself but learning to be really objective about your actions—fostering the motivation to create as little suffering as possible, and learning how to cut away unskillful actions and unskillful ways of judging and replace them with more skillful ones.

Buddhism does have a should. It doesn't impose it on anybody but it basically says, "If you really want to put an end to suffering, this is what you should do. Because this is the way things are, this is the way things work. These are the actions, these are the intentions that give rise to good results. These are the intentions that give rise to bad results. This is just the way it is."

So you want to develop realistic standards for yourself.

At the same time, learn how to keep the focus on judging the intention rather than judging your general grade as a person. Because there is no such thing—no such thing as a grade for you. There are certain moments when you do things well and certain moments where you don't do things so well. There are certain moments when you know what to say and do, and moments when you don't know what to say or what to do.

But the important thing is that you try to maintain the intention not to cause unnecessary suffering. And then you work at it, to get more skillful at it and to see your setbacks as opportunities to learn.

I've told you that story about the national living treasure in Japan, the potter, who one of my friends went to study with. My friend felt very upset that sometimes her pots would come out of the kiln looking fine and other times they wouldn't: They had been ruined by the fire. Either she'd done something wrong with the clay or she'd made the fire too strong, too weak, or whatever. Whereas the teacher always seemed to come out with perfect pots every day, every day, every day.

The difference between them was illustrated one day when she came to the studio and he was in the kiln. Apparently, that particular night's set of pots had not come out okay. A lot of his pots had been ruined. And he was sitting there trying to figure out what had happened. Not getting upset, just realizing that here was another opportunity to learn, something he hadn't learned yet—either because he was experimenting with something new or something new had come in that he hadn't anticipated. But he was perfectly calm about the whole thing, accepting that setbacks are part of the skill and taking it as an opportunity to learn.

So this healthy willingness to learn and a healthy attitude toward your intentions is what

gets you through. It's what made the potter a living national treasure, and it can make you a good meditator, too.

It's not a question of accepting who you are or rejecting who you are, but instead, really looking at your actions and seeing where they're causing trouble.

This whole issue of who-we-are is such a big issue in life. The Buddha kept trying to get around it. People who measured themselves as better than others because of their race or because of their background: He kept pointing out that that's not a valid basis for judgment.

People have tried to measure themselves as better than other people because they had the first jhana or the second jhana and those other people didn't have it. He said that's the sign of a low person, who would use attainments like that to measure other people, to exalt themselves and disparage others.

It's equally stupid to disparage yourself.

So the shift is away from, "What kind of person am I?" to "What is the intention here? What happens when I act on it?" Those are useful questions. They're questions that don't get you tied up in knots. And they really do help you learn.

Because after all, the whole path is all about learning. We start out with ignorance and we try to go to knowledge. And how do you get from ignorance to knowledge without learning? The problem with ignorance is that it causes us to act in ways that are harmful. So the actions are the issue here right now.

Always try to keep this point in mind because it helps clear up a lot of the other difficulties that the mind creates for itself

—so that we can start using the word "should" in the right way and we can start using our powers of judgment in the right way, a judicious way;

—and so that these powers of ours actually work to our advantage and not to our harm.