

## *Life's First Question*

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Philosophers in the time of the Buddha occupied themselves with very large questions: the nature of the universe, the nature of the soul. And these are precisely the questions where the Buddha said, “Don’t bother.” He focused on something very mundane. You look at the two definitions of right view, and the very first one is essentially a teaching on action. Actions are not abstract, they’re not far away, they’re something you’re doing all the time. In particular, he focused on the issue of action and its result. That right there does involve some metaphysical issues: the fact that actions are real, that you have the choice in what you do, that actions do have results, they do matter, they do amount to something. But still, the actual fact of an action is something you can watch all the time. It’s right there, right there in your mind.

The transcendent level of right view also sticks with very basic things. Again: the principle of cause and effect, but here focusing specifically on suffering and lack of suffering, which are still very immediate sorts of things. In fact, your awareness of suffering predates your awareness of even who you are, any concept of world or self or soul. As you came out of your mother’s womb, there was a lot of suffering right there. Nobody had to explain to you. You knew you didn’t like it. It was something you want to see ended.

So in essence, the Buddha’s teachings are asking you to try to find the answer to the very first question that occurred to you as you left the womb—preverbal, something very direct, immediate, and something that demands an answer: Why is there suffering? It’s good to keep this in mind, because oftentimes the issues of wisdom and discernment in Buddhism can seem awfully abstract. We can get tied up in the terminology. So keep reminding yourself that no matter what the terms are, they’re meant to point to something very immediate, something preverbal or preterminal: your immediate experience of action and result, suffering and lack of suffering. And the question is how to read the connections among those things.

This is why, when the Buddha teaches meditation, he doesn’t teach a technique that says, “Just do this and don’t think about the results. Just plow ahead.” He asks you to evaluate the results and learn how to develop your own sense of judgment as to what works and what doesn’t work. That’s essentially what right view, right resolve, all the other “rights” in the noble eightfold path come down to: what gets results in putting an end to suffering and what doesn’t—in other words, what’s skillful and what’s not.

And you have to learn how to judge for yourself what's working and what's not working. This will take time. Often when the meditation seems to be working, it's working on only, say, a very superficial level, leaving a lot of issues unresolved. Sometimes what works is not what you think is going to work. You may have faith in a particular approach, but it's not going to work for you or at least it's not working for you right now. You have to learn how to judge how much time to put into it before you understand: This is not working.

The Buddha himself illustrated this principle by going off on the wrong path for six years, engaging in self torture, and finally coming up at a dead-end. So what did he do? He decided, "This is not working," and he cast around to find some other way that might work.

That's what you've got to do as a meditator—not necessarily torture yourself for six years, but learn how to read the results of what's working and what's not working in your practice. It means learning how to read what's right in front of your eyes—actually closer than your eyes: your intentions and the results they're getting. So even though you can read up on dependent co-arising, on emptiness, and on all the other explanations of right view, all those words are meant to point to something very direct, very immediate. It's happening all the time in the mind, and in very basic terms.

When the Buddha defines wisdom, it starts with very simple things: "What when I do will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" Those are very simple things, very immediate, very direct. When he defines the measure of your wisdom, the measure of your discernment is your ability to look at something and realize that it's something you may not like to do but it leads to good results, so how can you talk yourself into doing it? Basic psychology. Or something you like to do and you know that leads to bad results: How do you talk yourself out of doing it? There's a strategic element to his teachings on wisdom and discernment.

Again, very direct, very simple. It all comes down to this principle of action and result.

This is why discernment is based on virtue, by way of concentration: in other words, learning how to look at your actions and being able to admit that "This is a mistake. This is not working. This is causing suffering and stress either for me or for somebody else. How can I do it differently? How can I talk myself out of doing it?" Then you learn how to apply that same principle to your mind in the practice of concentration: look at what you're doing, what's getting results and what's not getting results. Even the teaching on emptiness is simply a question of how you focus the mind in such a way that it's more and more empty of

disturbance, more and more empty of suffering, how to get your mind into a good state of concentration. and then how to watch it, how to observe it.

Essentially, it's the same skill that's applied to the question of virtue, in your thoughts and your words and your deeds. Now it's applied on a subtler level, but it's all in the same basic terms: action and result; skillful and unskillful; actions leading to suffering or stress, no matter how subtle, or actions leading away from suffering and stress.

So remember, it's all very direct, very immediate. If you find yourself getting lost in abstractions, pull yourself back down. Ask yourself, "These abstractions I'm thinking about, how do they apply simply to the question of what am I doing? If they're causing stress and suffering, how can I stop?" Sometimes these questions are very chastening. They force you to look at your actions in areas that we tend not to like to look at. But that unwillingness to look at things is something you've got to learn how to overcome. We throw up all kinds of defenses around it, and say, "Well, it's just the way I am. I'm this kind of person." But if that were an adequate answer, the Buddha would have thrown up his hands and said, "Sorry, I just can't teach human beings. It doesn't work." But he said that it's because we can learn how to be skillful, how we can overcome our old unskillful habits, that's why it was worthwhile to teach. That's why we have the Dhamma. That's why we practice. The whole issue of what our basic nature is, is a question the Buddha left totally unanswered. He answered questions about action and result, and changes in action and changes in results.

So do your best to focus your attention on that issue, learn how to translate everything else into those terms, and drop ways of thinking that get in the way of seeing things in those terms. When you keep things simple, and you keep the mind directly focused like this, then you begin to see the real value of these teachings, because they really do make a difference—again, a difference that can be directly experienced.

This is why these teachings have lasted for so many years and have been able to spread to so many different cultures. When you popped out of your mother's womb, you didn't have a particular culture. You had no idea what date it was. All you knew was there was suffering, and you didn't like it. That may not quite be what your face before you were born, but it's pretty close.

So you're dealing specifically with these issues. You're taking care of life's first question—first both in the sense of time and in the sense of importance.