

Hold on to Right View

April 7, 2022

We're here focusing on the present moment, watching the breath in the present moment, watching the *mind* in the present moment. What's the theory behind that? Why are we doing this? After all, there's not much here, while there are so many other issues out in the world right now. Why are we focusing here?

It's because the choices you make in the present moment have power. You can't go back and undo your choices in the past. And as for your choices in the future, the more skillful you can make your choices right now, the more likely you'll be to make skillful choices then.

We do this because our choices influence the extent to which we suffer or not. This means we have to be responsible right here. Other people have to be responsible for *their* choices. We can do our best to try to influence them in the right direction, but that influence tends to be more powerful the more skillful we are in our own choices. So we have work to do.

The Buddha discovered the power of the present moment in the course of his second knowledge. In his first knowledge, he had seen himself being dying and being reborn many, many times, and he noticed that he didn't stay the same from one life to the next.

There was a theory back at that time that whatever you were, you were always going to be reborn that way. If you were a human being, you'd be reborn as a human being; if you were a Brahman you'd be reborn as a Brahman; if you were a dog you'd be reborn as a dog. But in the Buddha's first knowledge he saw that that was not the case. His levels of being went up and down.

So the question was why. To answer it, he took the larger picture: Instead of looking just at his own lives, he looked at all beings throughout the cosmos, seeing them passing away and then being reborn. As he saw the larger picture, he could also see that there was a pattern: The changes were based on their actions. So he looked more carefully at actions in general, his own actions as well as theirs.

Other people had gotten that knowledge in the past, but they'd gotten waylaid by the question of, well, given all these changes, what is it that stays the same? *Who is it* that gets reborn? But he saw that the question was not the *who*, it was, what was the *action*, and how do actions give results?

Other meditators in the past had also seen that there were cases where someone would do good in this lifetime and be reborn in a good place. Other people would do unskillful things in this lifetime and be reborn in a bad place. The meditators who saw this came to the conclusion that kamma was deterministic: If you do good, you've got to be reborn in a good place next time around. If you do bad, you've got to be reborn in a bad place.

But then there were other meditators who saw cases where people did good in this lifetime and were reborn in a bad place, or did bad things in this life and were reborn in a good place. They came to the conclusion that your actions had no influence on your rebirth at all.

So the Buddha looked into the issue more carefully, and he saw that in the cases where someone who had done good things in this lifetime but had gone to a bad place afterwards, it was either because they had done bad things beforehand or bad things after, or more importantly had embraced wrong view at the moment of death. And vice versa: Those who had done bad things but went to a good place either had done good actions in the past, or good actions after the bad action, or they'd embraced right view at the moment of death.

Even the cases where people did good things and went to a good rebirth, they also embraced right view at the moment of death. And vice versa. Which shows you the power of that moment of death: The views you adopt at that point can reverse or get in the way of the influence of a lot of actions in your lifetime.

Now, that doesn't automatically undo them. It just delays their results. But sometimes delaying the results can give you some needed space: If you had bad actions but you embrace right view and go to a good place, maybe in that good place you start practicing the Dhamma. That would open an opportunity to get out, as in the case of *Āṅgulimāla*.

So, the present moment has a lot of power, and you want to make sure you maintain right view all the way to make the best use of that power. And part of right view, of course, is seeing just that: *Your choices in the present moment have a lot of power.*

On the level of the views that would get you reborn in a good place: You believe in the principle of action, that it's through your actions that you shape your life now and into the future. That's something you want to hold to.

In terms of the right view that would get you out of the system entirely—that's the four noble truths and the duties appropriate to those truths. Hold to that as well. The two levels are connected in that they both have to do with actions and results. It's simply that the four noble truths get more into the mind.

The actions that are causes are either the craving that leads to suffering, which is unskillful, or the noble eightfold noble path, which is skillful in that it leads to the end of suffering.

So again, action and result. It's a principle the Buddha said he couldn't prove to anybody just by talking to them. They could prove it for themselves by putting these principles into practice. And in order to put these principles into practice, they'd have to accept them as right view.

Notice: That's right *view*. It's not right knowledge. It's a way of looking at things that you're going to take on as a working hypothesis. But you remind yourself, if you have that hypothesis and follow through with it, you're more likely to act skillfully—to act in a way where you can't really criticize yourself because you're acting not to harm anybody. That's a good thing right there.

And—considering how powerful your views can be in determining your actions now and in determining your choices at the moment of death—you really want to hold on to that. It'll be confirmed at stream-entry because that's the point where you realize that it is possible to follow a path of action that leads to the end of suffering. Without that path of action, you wouldn't have gotten there. But until then, before your conviction is confirmed, or "verified," as the Buddha said, you've got to do your best to keep reminding yourself: This is important to hold on to for the possibilities it leaves open.

It's one of the reasons why he said there are different kinds of loss in life: You can lose your relatives, you can lose wealth, you can lose your health, you can lose your virtue, you can lose your right view. Of those, three are not really serious—losing your wealth, losing your relatives, losing your health—because that kind of loss doesn't necessarily take you to a bad place. When you lose those things, you can get them back over the course of time. But if you lose your right view and your virtue, you can do a lot of damage to yourself and to the people around you for a long time to come—so it's important that you hold on to this.

Someone once asked me, if I wanted to put the basic message of the Buddha's teachings into one sentence for someone who knew nothing about it, "What would you say?" I had heard another teacher say, "Your thoughts are not yours," which didn't strike me as especially useful. So I said, "Your actions have results, so be very careful about what you do."

The Buddha himself, when he talked about his awakening and tried to boil it down into the shortest possible formula, came up with *this-that conditionality* as the principle of causality, and it had to do with your actions. It had to do with cause and effect *as you perceive it directly*.

It's not the law of cause and effect, say, that governs the movement of the moons of Jupiter or the orbit of Pluto around the Sun. It has to do with cause and effect in the results you get from what you do and say and think. That principle was central to his awakening.

After all, his awakening taught him about action because he gained his awakening *through* action. And he found something that lies beyond action as a result. So, that's where we're headed as we practice.

He said it is possible through your efforts to reach the deathless—something that doesn't change that can be touched by the mind. It's not affected by time and space because it's not *in* time and space. You find it by following this path that we're working on right now: trying to put together the noble eightfold path.

Sometimes this factor is missing or that factor is missing, but we try to put them together until they all eight become one. You might translate the term *atthangika*, eight-factored or eightfold as "having eight parts": When the parts finally get put together right, then the path takes you beyond your doubts about the principle of karma.

It's like putting together the pieces of a model airplane. If they don't get put together right, it won't fly. Or it may fly a little bit, but then fall down. But once you get the parts put together right, it can take off and stay in the air.

So, to work in that direction, what do you do? You focus right here, on your choices. Try to make them as skillful as you can. Choose to bring the mind to a state of concentration, realize how things are fabricated, and then calm the processes of fabrication—like the Buddha explains in his instructions on breath meditation.

That's how things begin to get put together right.