

Skillful Action

When we pursue the pleasures of the world, we're hindered in our ability to take skillful action. As we've discussed, this is one of the most significant drawbacks of external sense pleasure.

Our happiness, the Buddha tells us, depends on the actions we take. If we take unskillful actions – actions informed by desire and aversion – we'll be headed for suffering; on the other hand, if we take skillful actions – actions aligned with the qualities of the heart, including lovingkindness and compassion – we'll move toward true happiness.

The practice of heedfulness enables us to take skillful action. As we've explained, in practicing heedfulness, we (1) pay attention to our actions, and (2) discern whether our actions are unskillful or skillful.

The fact is, most of us don't pay close attention to our actions. In large part because we're not able to; most of the time, we aren't in a position to observe our actions. Which is to say, we're not present. We're not awake. We're involved in chasing after external sense pleasures; we're lost in thought worlds. In order to be able to practice heedfulness, we need to be present; it's all but impossible to be heedful, to pay attention to our actions, if we're not able to keep ourselves grounded, in the present moment, in the body.

Often times, when we decide to follow a spiritual path, we engender a desire to act differently than the way we've been acting; in other words, we engender a desire to act more skillfully, with more love, more compassion. But despite our earnest resolve, we find it difficult to change our actions. We find it difficult to act skillfully. We act the same way we've acted before. We want to speak in a loving, compassionate manner with our teenage daughter, but we

find ourselves yelling at her, reprimanding her in a harsh manner. We want to treat our elderly parents with more kindness, but when we're with them, we engage them in an agitated, angry fashion.

Even if we have a genuine interest in changing our actions, if we're not able to maintain present moment awareness, we'll invariably find it difficult to act more skillfully. If we don't have the ability to maintain ourselves in the present moment as we go through our days and nights, we're not going to be able to look carefully, clearly, at our actions. We're not going to be able to practice discernment; we're not going to be able to discern the quality of the intention that informs our actions.

Nowadays there's much talk about the value of developing compassion. There's much talk, in particular, about the importance of developing self-compassion. And rightly so. But it isn't possible to act with compassion, toward others or ourselves, if we're not able to remain grounded in the present moment. We can read books about compassion, attend weekend seminars about compassion, listen to online talks about compassion, but if we're not able to maintain ourselves in the present moment we'll never be able to put to good use all the things we've learned. You may have had an experience in which you made an effort to learn to develop a skillful quality such as compassion, but when all was said and done you weren't able to follow through on what you learned. You attended a workshop on compassion. You were inspired, listening to the presenters, to live your life with greater compassion. And then, after the workshop ended, you went home and yelled at your partner; and then you chastised yourself, viciously, for yelling at your partner. Despite our wishes for ourselves, if we don't have the ability to keep ourselves centered, in the present moment, we're not going to be able to be

heedful of our actions; as a result, we'll be all but certain to act in habitual ways, in the unskillful ways we've always acted.

The dharma student who's learned to cultivate skillful internal pleasure is able to maintain herself in the present moment. She's able to keep her attention on her breath. She's able to keep her attention on her body. She's able to keep her mind on her body, to some extent, as she moves through her life. As a result, she's able to practice heedfulness. She's able to observe her actions. She's able to refrain from taking unskillful actions. She's able to take skillful actions.

The cultivation of internal pleasure and the practice of heedfulness enable us to take actions that will allow us to move toward true happiness. The dharma student, having learned to maintain skillful internal pleasure, is able to take skillful action. This is why skillful internal pleasure is considered skillful. It enables us to practice heedfulness and, in turn, act skillfully. It enables us to alleviate our suffering and find a greater happiness in life.

Grounded in the present moment, connected to the qualities of inner ease and pleasure, we're able to act skillfully in situations in which we may have previously acted out on habitual unskillful patterns. Let's say it's a Saturday afternoon. You we're looking forward to spending a few quiet, contemplative hours working in the garden. But your teenage daughter comes to you, tells you that she needs you to drive her somewhere. Almost immediately, you feel anger arising. The anger, arising out of conditions – your past karma – is familiar, habitual. In the past, you probably would've gotten caught up in this anger; you might very well have lashed out at your daughter. But now you're grounded, in the body. You're connected to an inner ease, pleasure, well-being. And you're heedful. You notice the anger arising. You notice the

inclination to yell at your daughter. And, understanding the drawbacks in speaking from a place of anger, you refrain from taking unskillful action. Instead, you cultivate the intention to speak to your daughter with compassion. And that's what you do. Established in the qualities of ease and pleasure, connected to the heart, you speak to her.

The dharma student who's learned to cultivate skillful internal pleasure is able to establish a foothold in her body. She's able to maintain her center, remain in a pleasant abiding, as she navigates her life. She's able to put some distance between herself and her experience. Accordingly, she's able to observe her experience. She's able to be heedful.

When we're able to maintain a center as we go through our days, we have a vantage point from which we're able to observe our actions. It's as if we're positioned in a tower, looking out, at our actions. From this vantage point, we're able to discern whether our actions are skillful or unskillful. In turn, we're able to decide which actions we want to take.

As we develop skillful internal pleasure, we become more able to discern the quality of the intention that's motivating our actions; we become more sensitive to the quality of our intention. By developing a pleasant inner abiding, we become more able to remain present, to keep the mind in the body. When mindfulness of the body is developed, when we have full body awareness – what we sometimes call embodied awareness – then we're able to discern the quality of our actions on a more refined level. We're able to practice discernment, heedfulness, on the level we need to be able to, to take action that's in support of the heart.

When we're "embodied," when we're about to take an action – or when we're in the process of taking an action – we're able to distinguish the quality of the intention behind the

action. Which is to say, we're able to ascertain a felt sense of the intention. We're able to recognize the intention by knowing it on a felt level, as it manifests in the body. If we're about to take an action that's informed by desire or aversion, we're able to discern the mental quality of desire or aversion as it takes form in the body.

To use the example cited above, when you feel anger when your teenage daughter asks you to do something you really don't want to do, you're able to discern the quality of anger, as a felt sense, in your body. You notice, perhaps, a pressure in the lower part of your chest. Noticing the anger, you're aware of your inclination to speak to your daughter in a harsh, angry manner. You're heedful. Seeing your unskillful intention, recognizing that if you act on it, it will cause harm, to you and your daughter, you refrain from speaking unskillfully.

Our capacity to practice heedfulness is greatly enhanced when we develop the ability to discern the quality of our intention by recognizing the intention as a felt sense in the body. When we're able to do this, we're more able to recognize unskillful intention; and we're more able to refrain from taking unskillful action. In turn, we're more able to take skillful action. When we're able to maintain a full body awareness, we're able to discern, in the body, the qualities of the heart: compassion and lovingkindness. We're able to connect, in a felt manner, to these skillful intentions. More and more, we're able to act wholeheartedly, with regard to others and ourselves. More and more, we act straight from the heart.

Centered in your body, heedful, feeling the anger in your body when your daughter asks you to give her a ride, you put aside your intention to speak to her with an intention imbued with anger; and, instead, you cultivate an intention informed with lovingkindness. You fabricate your intention. "Let me speak with lovingkindness," you say to yourself. And then you touch in to

your heart. You apprehend a felt sense of lovingkindness. And from the heart, you speak to your daughter.

When we become well-developed in skillful internal pleasure, we're able to look at our actions in a calm, objective manner. We're able to look at our actions with equanimity. When we're established in equanimity, we remain calm, composed, steady. We keep our balance. We don't get knocked off stride when we're confronted with agreeable and disagreeable experience.

Most of us spend most of our lives in an off-balance posture. We're pushed to and fro by the circumstances of our lives. As a result, we're not able to focus, evenly, calmly, on our actions.

Life, in many ways, is comprised of an ongoing series agreeable and disagreeable events. The Buddha delineated eight kinds – four pairs – of agreeable and disagreeable experience. They're known as the eight vicissitudes. They are: pleasure and pain, gain and loss, status and disrepute, praise and blame. Most of us, the Buddha indicated, become rattled, thrown, when confronted with these vicissitudes of life. We chase after pleasure, gain, status, and praise. We rebel against pain, loss, disrepute, and blame. We lose our composure. We lose our balance.

Each of us, in any given day, meets with agreeable and disagreeable experience. We may encounter what's agreeable in various blatant and subtle forms. An offer for a job that we really want. A new romantic relationship. Acknowledgment in our field of work. A compliment from a friend. And, of course, we'll face what's disagreeable. An illness. The death of a parent. Criticism from the boss. An argument with a friend. A task that one of our teenage kids asks us to attend to. A computer that breaks down. A long line in the bank.

The dharma student, connected to a quality of skillful internal pleasure, faced with agreeable and disagreeable experience, keeps her balance. She's not significantly influenced by the ups and downs of life.

When we have a pleasant abiding, the delightful and difficult situations of life don't have the same impact on us. We're not swayed by external experiences, because we don't depend on external experiences for our happiness. We're not so reliant on the vicissitudes of life to be the way we'd like them to be. We don't need things to go our way in order to feel good. We already feel good.

When your teenage daughter asks you to drive her to her friend's house, you're not thrown off balance. Although you'd prefer spend your Saturday afternoon working in the garden, it's not such a big problem. It's not an obstacle to your well-being. You feel good. You have access to inner pleasure. You're at ease. You put to the side the familiar, habitual anger that forms in the body. Touching in to your heart, responding to your daughter, you speak with lovingkindness. Then you take her to her friend's house. In the car, driving, you find, in the body, a quality of inner pleasure. You feel good. You're connected to your heart. From a place of lovingkindness, you talk with your daughter. You enjoy a wholehearted conversation with her.

When we're developed in skillful internal pleasure, we don't get thrown by life. We keep steady, composed. We remain at ease. As a result, we're able to be heedful. We're able to pay close attention to what we're doing. We're able to see things clearly. We're able to make skillful decisions. We're able to decide what to do, based on what's in our best interests. We're able to move forward in our lives, choosing our actions, making our way, to a greater happiness.

The decisions we make about what actions to take determine the quality of our life. At times we're asked to make major decisions, about our relationships, our work, our living situation. And there are many other more subtle decisions that we're asked to make, from day to day, moment to moment.

As we learn to develop skillful internal pleasure, we're more and more able to make skillful decisions. More and more, we're able to make decisions from the heart, decisions informed by lovingkindness and compassion.

When we look at the decisions we make, what we often see is that it isn't our habit to make skillful decisions. Many of our decisions, we see, are driven by our wish to avoid and escape experience that we find disagreeable, unpleasant. And, of course, many of our decisions are based on our desire to acquire external sense pleasures.

But when we learn to maintain a pleasant abiding throughout the course of our days and nights, we aren't quite as inclined to look for an external escape from painful experience. Developed in inner pleasure, we aren't ruled by a desire to acquire external sense pleasure. We aren't at the mercy of external pleasure, the Internet, the smartphone, ice cream, martinis, porn.

When we have a reliable source of pleasure within, we have less need for the external sense pleasures. Our needs are being met.

No longer dominated by the need to acquire pleasure from external sources, we begin to put more emphasis on taking actions informed by the qualities of the heart. Instead of making decisions based on a desire to achieve the happiness derived from sense pleasure, we begin to make decisions based on our wish to know true happiness.