June 2, 2024

The path to awakening can be a long journey. Read about cases in the Canon where people listen to one Dhamma talk and bingo, awakening. We’d like our practice to be that way. And I must admit, I’d like to give a Dhamma talk that would awaken everybody, but it hasn’t happened yet. You have to realize that when the Buddha was teaching, he was basically picking all the fruit that was ready to fall from the tree. But he also gave instructions for how to ripen the remaining fruit. It may take time, but it can still yield the results that we want, the ripe fruit that we want to eat. So when you see that your path is a long one, you have to have the right attitude. Keep your spirits up all along the path. Watch out for any attitudes that would drain your strength, make it difficult for you to go on. Of course, the main instruction you often get is that every journey starts with one step, and each journey is done one step at a time. So it’s not that helpful to focus on the end of the journey, but to focus on what you’re doing right now. You find that each step is manageable. You think about the thousands of steps between you and the goal, and it’s going to get depressing. But you say, “Well, there’s one step here. I’ll take that step. And then there’s the next step. You take that step.” And it really does get you closer to the goal. But it’s more than just that. You have to have confidence in yourself and also the right understanding of what progress means. I was told that one of Ajahn Mun’s most frequent Dhamma talks was to remind his students that they had everything that they needed in order to gain awakening. And the fact that the forest tradition developed and thrived, is, from one point of view, one of the most unlikely things in the history of Buddhism. It was essentially a movement among the sons of peasants, the daughters of peasants, to recover the Buddhist teachings, to recover the practice. They got some help from the reforms that were coming out of Bangkok, but there was a part of those reforms that was destructive. And the idea that if you were going to get anywhere, you had to become a Pali scholar to do that, you had to go to Bangkok. It took connections, and it took a lot of social status that a lot of these guys didn’t have. I mean, everything in society said, “Basically, you don’t have a chance. You don’t have the connections you need to get anywhere. You’re poor. You’re uneducated.” And so Ajahn Mun would often remind them that they had everything they needed to practice. You’ve got a body. You’ve got the breath coming in and out. You’ve got a mind. You’re sane. You can listen to a Dhamma talk and make sense out of it. That’s all you need. Those are the building blocks. So all the resources for awakening are right here. It’s simply a matter of developing them. The image he used was of planting rice. You’ve got the dirt, you’ve got the rice plants, you’ve got the rice seeds. It’s going to take work, but it can be done. And, of course, you can’t simply plant the seed today and have the rice plant come out tomorrow. It takes time. But you have to have confidence that by planting the seed, the plants will grow. It’s simply a matter of focusing on the causes, and the results will come. Again, those little tiny rice plants that come out, at first they look like grass when they first come out of the ground. You think about how much taller they’re going to have to be and how much bigger the leaves will be and everything, and it can get you discouraged. But you have to have confidence. These little rice plants will grow. You can’t make them grow by pulling on them. That just breaks the roots and kills the plant. But you do everything to protect them, to nurture them, and gradually they do grow. You’ve got to be patient. You’ve got to be patient and have confidence. At the same time, you notice these rice plants grow in the dirt, and yet they turn into rice, which is similar to another image that Jon Munn liked to use. This is famous all over the Buddhist world. That awakening comes like a lotus. Where does a lotus grow? It grows in the mud. It grows in stagnant pools. It grows in all kinds of places. It grows in all kinds of disgusting places. And yet when the lotus blossom comes out, it’s pure white, clean. Nothing can soil it. Water gets on the lotus blossom and it just rolls right off. It’s important to remind yourself of this. Sometimes you look at your mind and it’s just full of defilements, greed, anger, delusion, fear, conceit. Then you wonder, “How could you ever attain awakening?” Think about the lotus. The lotus comes from the mud. It grows out of the mud. And yet there’s something pure inside that can develop from the mud. And it’s the only place the lotus will grow. You put the lotus in nice, clean water with no dirt at all, and it’s going to die. It needs the dirt. So when you look at your mind and it doesn’t seem to be getting any more awakened than it was a year ago or two years ago, remember, this is where awakening grows, in this kind of mind. So take heart. You’ve got everything that’s required. It’s simply a matter of learning to be patient and learning to value the little steps along the way. Because when you look back on your practice and say, “There’s no progress at all,” it can be for one of many reasons. One is that your sensitivity has gotten greater. The things that used to not bother you and not seem to be anything wrong at all now loom larger because your sensitivity has improved. John Furin gives the example of cleaning a house. If you just let the dust accumulate day after day after day, you don’t notice how much dust has come in on any particular day because it’s all just dust added to the dust already there. But if you wipe everything clean and then come back the next day, you realize, “Oh, dust has come.” You can see it more clearly because you’re wiping it, you’re cleaning it. So when the mind seems more defiled than before, largely it’s because you’ve gotten more sensitive than before. But you’ve got to watch out for it. Or it’s that assumption that there’s going to be one silver bullet that’s going to take care of everything. You’ve got all these bullets in your practice, and none of them seem to be the silver bullets. You just throw them away. This is a misunderstanding that goes way back into Buddhist history. There was a monk in China, Shenghui, who said that any kind of practice gets in the way of seeing your true Buddha nature. If you’re doing anything, if you’re involved in any practice, that’s an obstruction. It’s basically Buddha nature or nothing, awakening or nothing. It’s kind of like the Rush Limbaugh of the Buddhist world. He cut through everything that was of any value and left nothing standing. His attitude still seems to infect a lot of meditators today, that it’s either awakening the one solution to your problems, the one thread in the tapestry. When you pull it, the whole thing will fall apart. Anything that falls short of this is just totally, totally falling short. I mean, there’s no gradation at all. That’s not how the Buddha taught. His path is a gradual one, and each step takes you closer to the goal, even though it may not be right there at the goal, not be the silver bullet. But you’ve got some other bullets that actually work. They may not strike to the heart of the matter, but they weaken the beast. You can use several analogies to think about this. One is like becoming a fighter. You don’t go into the ring with a world champion rod off. You start with people who are like you, at your level of fighting ability, and then gradually you work up. You figure out how to beat that particular opponent. You learn some lessons from the fight. Then you take those lessons and you apply them to the next fight and the next. You’re not the world champion yet, but you’re working your way up. And the skills you develop from each fight gradually accumulate. Another way of thinking about it is the way acupuncture sometimes approaches a disease. There may be that one needle that’ll cure a particular problem, but in order to get that one needle in that one place and for it to work, you have to put in the effort to prepare the patient. You use different herbs and sort of corral the disease or the problem into one spot. You place deep needles in different parts of the body and again you corral things into the one spot. And then once everything is in that one spot, then you’ve got the one needle that’ll take care of it. In other words, the little insights you gain along the path are valuable. They help chip away at this block of delusion. And when they chip it away, chip it away, chip it away, it finally gets so small that there’s just one more chip and that’s it. You think, “Well, gee, it’d be nice to know that one chip way in advance. That saves all the work.” It doesn’t work that way. If you just did the one chip without the preliminaries, it wouldn’t do anything. It’s the preliminaries that set everything up. Or, in the Buddha’s analogy, the continental shelf off of India. It gradually slopes, gradually slopes, until it finally has that final drop-off to get to the deep ocean. Without following the gradual slope, you don’t meet up with a drop-off. So keep these points in mind so that you don’t belittle your progress, so you don’t drain away your strength and confidence. Learn how to take joy in the little steps, the little understandings, and keep coming back, coming back. Like the goose that lays the golden eggs. As in any fairy tale, the eggs change into something else pretty quickly. But make sure that you nurture the goose so more eggs can come, more eggs can come, and do good things with them right away. That way, you take advantage of the gold and you finally get closer and closer to the ultimate gold egg that doesn’t change. I don’t know if the story is like that, but that’s the story that you need to keep in mind as a meditator. The little steps do make a difference. What’s important is that you keep up your confidence, keep up your energy, so you can do each step one at a time, one at a time, and it will get you to the goal. You can’t make the last step without all the other steps that get you there. So value each of the steps as you make them.

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