Admit Your Stupidity

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There are two qualities that help to gain awakening. One is internal, the other is external. The external quality is what the Buddha calls “admirable friendship.” When you find someone who knows the way to the end of suffering and is willing to teach it to you, and actually embodies the qualities of the path, the Buddha sets out four. And it turns out that those qualities are the same qualities that lead to your own happiness in the future, when you embody them in yourself. Which means that as you’re practicing, you’re learning to be a good friend to yourself. The qualities are conviction, virtue, generosity, and discernment. Of course, the discernment there becomes the internal quality, what the Buddha calls “appropriate attention.” It’s a matter of asking the right questions, questions that help you understand where you’re creating unnecessary suffering and how you can put an end to that. That, for the Buddha, was the big issue in life, the big issue he wanted to address after his awakening. You can imagine all the things he saw in the night of his awakening. He could have told us all kinds of stories about previous lifetimes, what he’d seen in the different levels of the cosmos. And occasionally he did. But it’s all for the purpose of getting us to look back at what we’re doing. Because the choices we’re making are important. He wanted us to see how important those choices are. This is one of the reasons why we meditate. It’s not just to get the mind into a nice space where it’s comfortable, but so that we can see how we’re shaping things in the present moment. And if we’re doing it with a lack of skill, we can overcome that. What are you doing right now? Right now you can say you’re trying to stay with the breath. That’s developing one of the factors for the path to the end of suffering. That’s an appropriate thing to do. And the questions that come up as to how to do this effectively, those are appropriate questions, appropriate attention. We’re not just here watching things coming and going and saying, “Oh, look at the nature of reality. It comes and it goes. I’ll just stop having attachment.” The mind doesn’t work that way. Because we’ll be seeing, as we get to know the mind, that it tends to feed. And to think that you can simply give up feeding by realizing that food is impermanent is not very realistic. You have to understand why the mind is feeding on things that are unhealthy. You give it better health food, and then you strengthen it to the point where it doesn’t need food anymore. That’s where we’re headed. But first you’ve got to see very clearly what you’re doing right here, right now, which is why alertness is one of the important qualities you’re trying to develop. When you’re with the breath, you know. When you’re not with the breath, you know. Of course, for most of us, when we’re not with the breath, we don’t know what’s going on. It’s because we’re ignorant of what we’re doing that we wander off. Which means, simply, there are lapses in our alertness. So we have to remind ourselves to watch very carefully the next time. That’s what mindfulness is all about. Remembering the things that you need to do to do that skillful thing. And try to catch yourself more and more quickly each time as the mind is about to wander off. You’ll begin to see there’s a certain discussion going on inside. Should I go or should I not go? And part of the mind will say, “Yeah, let’s go.” Another part of the mind will say, “No, we’re not supposed to do that right now.” There are little kids in the back of a classroom whispering, hoping that the teacher doesn’t hear their whispers. And for the most part, the teacher is pretty happy to ignore what’s going on. But then when the teacher ignores things too long, then the kids in the back of the room will take over the classroom, which is not what you want. So you’ve got to be very careful to watch when something comes up in the mind, the urge to go someplace else. Be clear about that fact and then do what you can to counteract it. Call it out for what it is. Then ask yourself, “Why is the mind wanting to wander off?” Sometimes it’s just ornery. Other times it’s because the breath is not very comfortable. It’s not a pleasant object to be with, not an interesting object to be with. So the mind’s going to look for something else to get interested in. That’s why we have to spend a lot of time exploring the breath. Here we are trying to train the mind, and we’re getting into discussions about the breath and the tiny toe at the bottom of your foot. Okay, well, it’s an exercise that strengthens the mind, strengthens your powers of alertness, strengthens your sense of what’s going on inside. So it’s a rollercoaster. It’s a relevant question, a relevant issue. As long as you’re dealing with what’s going on in the body and the mind right here, right now, it’s relevant to the meditation. So learn to recognize which questions are useful right now and which ones are not. When you’re meditating, the Buddha divides things into two sorts of questions. The questions that help get the mind to settle down, and the questions that give rise to insight. The settling questions are, “How can you unify the mind? How can you bring it together? How can you make it want to settle down? How can you allow it to enjoy settling down?” So those are good questions to ask as you’re trying to settle in here. “What kind of breathing would you want to be with right now?” And you can think of the breath doing different things that it ordinarily doesn’t do, or at least you don’t notice it doing, to make it more interesting. And as the mind settles down, allow it to be here for a while. Don’t be in too great of a hurry to move on. As I was saying yesterday, one of the first defilements you have to deal with as the mind finally does settle down is its complaints that it’s boring, nothing’s happening, nothing interesting is happening there. Make it a challenge to see through that complaint. Where is that coming from? Who is that in the mind? You finally get things nice and comfortable inside, and then it complains. We have a mind that tends to complain quite a lot. You give it one pleasure, and it wants something else. So if you’re going to understand your cravings and clingings, look into that one. This is where we get into the questions of insight. The Buddha talks in terms of fabrication, the way you put your experience together in the present moment. So you ask, “How does the fabrication work? How should the fabrications be regarded? How should they be seen with insight?” You regard them either in terms of the five aggregates or in terms of the three fabrications, bodily, verbal, and mental. Bodily fabrication is the breath. Verbal fabrication is the way you talk to yourself. The Canon calls it “directed thought and evaluation.” You direct your thoughts to a topic, and then you evaluate it, like you’re doing with the breath right now. You direct your thoughts to the breath, you evaluate it, and then you have mental fabrications, which are perceptions and feelings. The perceptions are the images you hold in mind, and the feelings are feeling tones of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. So you can ask yourself what kind of perceptions would be useful to get the mind to settle down. In fact, this is one of the ways in which you can develop tranquility and insight together as you make the questions about fabrication relate to how the mind is settling down. What way of talking to yourself about the breath helps you to settle down? In this way, you’re not only engaging in these activities, but you’re stepping back a little bit and watching them to see what they’re doing, what’s effective and what’s not effective. That ability to step back—so much of the practice depends on the ability to step back and reflect. As the Buddha said, you nourish the practice through commitment and reflection. And the reflection is the stepping back, the part that asks questions. As a religion, Buddhism is really interesting in the way it gets you to ask questions. There are so many religions out there that don’t want you to ask questions. They just discourage it. But the Buddha himself saw that this was how he gained awakening. He looked at his own actions and the question was, “What am I doing wrong?” He was very quick to try to recognize his own mistakes. That’s how he gained awakening. He had no one to teach him the way. So he had to experiment. And in his experiment, he really would commit himself to different paths until he’d exhausted them. Then he’d reflect on what still was lacking—that willingness to look at his own actions, see his own mistakes, and learn from them. That’s how he gained awakening. And that’s how we have to gain our awakening, too. So try to develop that attitude of mind that’s willing to admit mistakes. And learn from them. There’s that old line that Talia Rung said about the Bourbons, “They never forgot anything, but they never learned anything.” In other words, they kept their old grudges, but they never learned from their own mistakes. That’s the opposite of Dhamma practice. The things you don’t want to forget are not other people’s misdeeds. You want to not forget your own, so you can learn from them. When you have that attitude toward the practice, you’ve overcome a lot of problems right there. I know when I went to stay with the Jon Fung, I’d been a very smart kid in class throughout school, and so I thought I was pretty smart. As Jon Fung was very quick to point out, the areas where I was still stupid, where I was still ignorant, that was a big gift. It made me more and more conscious that there was a lot that I had to learn. And I had to develop that attitude, okay? I’m willing to admit that I’m stupid. That’s how I learn. The people who don’t admit their own stupidity, they’re never going to learn. After all, what is ignorance? You’re causing yourself suffering, and you don’t even notice it. Or you won’t admit it, whatever you see. That’s stupid. That’s why Jon Suat, when he would translate “Aviccai” into Thai, would use the word for stupidity, “ngo.” It’s when you’re willing to admit that you’re stupid, then you have room to learn. That’s what we’re here for. We’re here to learn. And learning how to ask the right questions is how we get on the right path, how we take that stupidity and learn how to overcome it. But the questions always revolve around, “Where’s the suffering? What is the suffering? What am I doing that’s suffering and causing the suffering? What can I do to learn to stop?” That’s what appropriate attention is all about—to ask those questions. Ask the questions that are related to the duties of the Four Noble Truths as well. How do you comprehend your suffering? How do you abandon what you’re doing to cause suffering? What qualities of mind do you develop so you can realize the end of suffering? Take those questions and you can apply them into all kinds of areas in your life. You can apply them at work, you can apply them in the family, you can apply them while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. Those are the questions that keep you on the path, the questions that help you overcome the ways you’ve been foolish in the past and help you to learn from your mistakes. When the Buddha discusses how people arrive at reconciliation, it’s when someone in the relationship has done something wrong and admits that they did something wrong, and they’re willing to try not to repeat that mistake. That’s how you can have a reconciliation. In this way, we’re reconciling ourselves with our own behavior all the time, if we have that attitude. That’s one of the reasons why the Buddha said it wasn’t that he was arguing with the world, it was that the world argued with him. He was constantly reconciling himself to what he’d done wrong so that he’d been in a position to learn. So if you can reconcile yourself to what you’ve done wrong, reconcile yourself with your mistakes, it shows that you’re open to reconciliation with the rest of the world. Now, whether they want reconciliation or not, that’s their issue. But you can do your part all the time.

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