

Admitting Mistakes

October 2002

Today's the last day of the Rains retreat. It's called the Mahapavarana, "The Great Invitation." It's the day when, instead of chanting the Patimokkha, the monks invite one another to criticize their faults. In other words, if anyone during the Rains has either seen or heard or suspected that one of the other monks has broken a rule, this is a time when he's free to speak up. Ordinarily, before you want to criticize someone for that sort of thing, you have to ask that person's permission. But the Invitation is an act of giving that permission without even being asked. So it opens the floor to any criticisms concerning breaches of the rules at all.

It's an important ceremony. Nowadays, it tends to be more or less pro forma: You do the Pavarana, you're happy that it's over quicker than the Patimokkha, and you can get on with other things. But it is an important reminder to be open to criticism, to be willing to admit mistakes. Otherwise, how are you going to learn?

It's a basic principle throughout the Buddha's teachings. We all make mistakes. Even the Buddha himself made mistakes before his awakening, going down the wrong path many, many times in many different lifetimes before he discovered the Middle Way. It was through those points in his practice when he realized, "What I've been doing, sometimes for years, was a mistake," and he was willing to look for other ways to do things: That's what enabled him to become the Buddha, to become awakened.

There's no way you can learn unless you recognize a mistake for a mistake and resolve to make changes. The people who do some of the most damage in the world are those who don't see the error of their own ways or who think that admitting a mistake as a sign of weakness. They think that the people who oppose them are the ones who are stupid or ill-intentioned. They're not willing to turn around and look at their own problems, their own mistakes. They end up doing a lot of damage both for themselves and for the people around them.

We see this clearly in others, but often it's harder to see it in ourselves. That's why we want not simply to go through a pro forma ceremony but, at all times, to be willing to listen to other people's criticism.

There's an important rule against disrespect. It's primarily aimed at showing disrespect to other monks when they criticize you, either with regard to the Dhamma or the Vinaya, but there's an interesting subsidiary rule: There's a lesser

offense for showing disrespect for anybody who criticizes you for anything. Even if the criticism is ill-founded, even if the person is a fool, you don't show disrespect. You show yourself as being open to criticism. Because, that way, you learn things you might not have learned otherwise.

So even though the ceremony of the Invitation has become pro forma, it's important to keep its meaning in mind and to try to apply it at all times in all aspects of your life.

There's an interesting sutta where the Buddha says there are two kinds of fools in the world: those who won't admit their mistakes, and those who won't accept an apology from someone who does admit his mistakes. It's important that we learn to be wise in both respects, both on an external level and on an internal level.

After all, some of the biggest mistakes we make in life are the ones inside the mind: siding with an unskillful thought as opposed to a skillful one, taking up an unskillful practice and refusing to see the harm it creates. These are things we really have to be on the lookout for, because often they're the things nobody else can see, the things that go on inside our mind. Other people may be able to see some of the outside effects but they can't be sure about what's going on in the mind: what thought, what intention lies behind an unskillful action. We're the ones who know. And if we don't develop the habit from the outside of admitting mistakes, it's hard to admit mistakes inside.

So as you meditate and as you go through other aspects of your practice, always be on the lookout for what you're doing, why you're doing it, and what the results are, because as the Buddha pointed out to Rahula, that's the way you begin to see what's a mistake and what's not: by looking at the results of your thoughts, of your words, of your deeds.

For example, while we're sitting here looking at the breath: How's it going? Is the breath comfortable? Is it as comfortable as it could be? Exactly what stage are you in the practice? Often we don't even have our bearings as we're trying to settle down. Or if things have begun to settle down, we have to look after other problems. After all, when you start out, you're focusing in the direction of stillness, stillness, stillness. When the mind does come to a certain measure of stillness, you have to watch out for sleepiness.

So how do you prevent that? Well, you expand your range of awareness, give the mind work to do with the breath, to keep yourself alert, to keep yourself awake, so that you don't just drift off into the extreme of restlessness or the extreme of sloth and torpor. There's a balance that has to be made. It requires skill, it requires attention, and not just thinking, "Still, still, still, still, still." You've got to notice where you are and what should be done—what the dangers are in the

position you're currently in and what can be done to prevent them. Or if you find yourself slipping off into one of the extremes, what you can do to correct it. This is a principle that's basic to any skill.

Ajaan Lee has a nice passage. He says it's like learning how to make baskets. You make a basket. Instead of just being proud of the fact that you've finally made it, you've got a basket, you take a good look at it. Okay, what still needs to be done here? How can it be improved? And then you try to make another one, better than the last one. How does it become better than the last? You try to pay more attention to what you're doing, to see precisely, if there is a mistake, where it came from. And then you make corrections.

This is an important aspect of the Buddha's teachings: your ability to refine your powers of judgment, refine your standards. The teaching starts out with the assumption that we're all imperfect, we're all going to make mistakes. So instead of just telling you not to make mistakes ever again, the Buddha says that mistakes are to be expected. The issue is how to learn from them, so instead of being enemies they become your teachers. You look at the texts and can learn a lot of basic principles, but their precise application in the details: That's left up to you to figure out on your own.

And it's not that if the Buddha could have detailed every possible situation that might come up in the practice then he would have done it. He seems to have intentionally left certain things up to your powers of judgment so that you can develop your own powers of judgment. Because that's the aspect of the mind that turns into discernment. If the practice were simply a matter of following a recipe, following a mechanical process, the Buddha would have described all the steps in the process. But it can't be done that way. Each meditator has to develop his or her own powers of judgment and powers of observation—because those are the powers that lead to release.

So when we participate in something like this morning's Pavarana ceremony, it's important to reflect on the meaning and how it connects with some of the deeper teachings, particularly the teachings that apply to the training of the mind. Because there's nothing in the Vinaya that's irrelevant to the mind. The Dhamma and the Vinaya are all of a piece, simply that they approach the question of training the mind from different sides. The Dhamma focuses primarily on principles; the Vinaya, primarily on rules. The general principles can't cover the whole territory nor can rules with their specifics. The combination of the two puts the question of how to train the mind into a 3-D perspective, with the two points of view adding depth to each other.

So it's important to keep both in mind. When you go through a particular

ceremony, it's not just something you just have to get through. There's lesson there. If you learn how to extract the lesson, you've benefited from the ceremony, from the rule, from the tradition. And this willingness to put energy into learning, into looking for the lesson, is what makes all the difference in the practice.