

Honesty

June 5, 2007

The chants we had just now form quite a juxtaposition, talking about aging, illness, and death, the world being swept away, slave to craving, and then the wish: “May I be happy, may all living beings be happy.” Sometimes the Buddha is accused of being pessimistic. But the whole purpose of his teachings is to find true happiness. Where he talks about the negative side of life, it’s simply to remind you that you can’t find true happiness in those areas.

When he talks openly about suffering, aging, illness, and death, he’s like a doctor. You go to a doctor, and the doctor asks, “Where does it hurt? What are your symptoms?” When he asks those questions, you don’t accuse him of being pessimistic. He’s doing his job. And he’s not afraid to talk about where it hurts because he has a cure. It’s the same with the Buddha. He talks about suffering, very openly, very explicitly, because he has a cure. It lies in that fifth contemplation: “We’re the owners of our actions; whatever we do, for good or for evil, to that will we fall heir.” It’s through our actions that we find true happiness. This is why so much of our training focuses on the mind, because your actions come out of your mind. Your intentions shape what you do and determine the results of your actions.

A lot of the practice is a question of skill in how to act in such a way that avoids suffering, and then finally cuts through the causes of suffering. That requires a lot of precision, a lot of dedication, all the qualities that you need in developing a skill.

So when you come to the practice—say you’re going to focus on the breath—think about the various qualities you’ve used to develop skills in the past. You have to be mindful and to be very alert. Then there’s another quality the Buddha talks about, and that’s honesty: being honest about what you’re doing, honest about the results. It’s by being honest in that way that you get really good at this skill you’re trying to master. If you deny what you’ve done, or you try to cover up the fact that you’ve made a mistake, you never learn. This is why the Buddha made honesty a primary requisite he would look for in accepting a student. He said, “Bring me someone who’s honest and observant, and I will teach that person the Dhamma.”

This means being honest not only with other people, but also with yourself. When I was young, my mother liked to experiment with recipes. And you know how children are, they don’t want to eat anything new. They like familiar foods.

So we were always very skeptical about what she was going to put on the table. There was one time she found a recipe for African peanut butter and chicken soup. She set it on the table. Everybody sat there looking at the soup, then we looked at her. She took the first sip and said, “This is awful.” So my father got some steaks out of the freezer, and we had steaks. That was why I trusted my mother, because she was honest. And as a meditator, you have to learn how to trust yourself. The only way you can trust yourself is if you’re honest with yourself, too.

So when you sit down to do the meditation and it’s not getting results, you have to ask yourself, “What am I doing wrong?” Be very careful to look at what you’re actually doing. When the instructions say to stay with the breath, are you really staying with the breath? Or are you anticipating what’s going to come around the next corner? Right anticipation is not a factor in the path. Right mindfulness, right effort, right concentration—these are path factors. So you actually do the causes. When you pay attention to the causes, you’re going to get the results.

So when things aren’t going as well as you’d like them to, turn around and look: “What am I doing?” Over time you’ll begin to see the connection between your actions and your results.

This is a very large area of ignorance in our minds. When the Buddha talks about ignorance, he isn’t talking about being ignorant of some metaphysical principles. It’s something very simple: being ignorant of what you’re doing when you’re causing suffering and when you’re not, when you’re causing stress and when you’re not.

We tend to be very blind about our intentions and blind about our actions. Something very close, right here, yet we don’t see it—because we’ve learned not to see it.

So you have to unlearn that habit. This is why mindfulness is coupled with alertness. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind. For example, right now you’re going to keep the breath in mind. Each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, you remind yourself: Stay with the breath. You don’t go wandering off. Then you’re alert, both to what the breath is doing, and to whether you’re staying with the breath or not. If you find yourself leaning into the future, i.e., anticipating, or leaning into the past, starting to get judgmental about what you just did, try to correct that. That’s the third quality, which is ardency. In other words, you really try to do it well. That’s what you focus on. That’s the theme of your concentration.

As for the sense of peace and stillness, that you want as result. It comes by putting the causes together correctly and sticking with the causes for quite a while. Think of it as planting seeds. If you plant a seed and look at it for five minutes, you water it and it's not growing right away, that's not an excuse to stop watering it. Some seeds take time, so you keep on watering it. If after a month or so, it's not sprouting, then you know you've got a bad seed. But in the meantime, you withhold judgment. You stick with it, stick with it, stick with it.

In other words, you have to give yourself.

This is why the Buddha's teachings often start with generosity. I don't know how many times people come to meditation focusing what they're going to get out of it. One time, when I translated for Ajaan Suwat as he was teaching at IMS, one of his comments after the third day of the retreat was: "You notice how grim these people are?" His analysis of why they were grim was because, as he said, "These people have no experience with generosity and the precepts. They haven't developed the confidence that comes with knowing that when you really give of yourself, things do come in response."

So you put yourself in the practice. You're honestly putting out the effort. You focus on the effort, you focus on the causes, and the results are sure to come. If they're not coming, then you reflect on what you're doing and what you might be doing wrong. You can consult with other people, but ultimately you have to be the judge of what's working and what's not.

The other quality you bring—this is something Ajaan Suwat would often talk about—is a sense of confidence, putting yourself in a good mood as a prerequisite for getting the mind to settle down. This means that when setbacks come, as they inevitably will, you don't immediately jump on yourself and berate yourself. You encourage yourself. The fact that you've noticed that it's not going well, he said, is a good sign, because so many people go through life without admitting when things aren't going well, when they've made mistakes. You learn to have confidence in your ability to read the situation and come up with alternative approaches.

So it's not just techniques that we're working on here, it's also qualities of mind that you bring to the techniques: honesty, confidence, patience, the ability to focus on the causes, and the conviction that the causes will take care of the results. In this way, you get to learn how to read your own mind. You develop your own sensitivity. This is where insight comes; this is where discernment arises: not by memorizing what you've heard, but learning to develop your own sensitivity to causes and results, to your own actions, and the sense of ease or lack

of ease that comes from your own actions. In other words, you learn to take responsibility for your own happiness.

The Buddha's teachings might be called a serious pursuit of happiness: serious not in the sense of being grim, but in a sense of being really honest about what's happy and what's not happy, what works and what doesn't work. You would think that people will take happiness seriously, but look at the way most people lead their lives: They simply pick up an idea from someone else and say, "Well, this looks good, let's follow them," without really looking at whether that person is truly happy or not. But it's when you're honest about where suffering is, and where the stress is, where the sense of dis-ease is in your life—that's when you can really begin to do something about it.

This comes down to your actions, and your actions come out of your mind. This is why so much time is spent focused on the mind. You want to be very clear about what your intentions are, when they're skillful, when they're not, learning from your mistakes. This is where the honesty comes in.

Think of the Buddha's original teachings to his son, Rahula: Look at your intentions. If you anticipate that they're going to cause harm, don't follow through with them. If you don't anticipate harm, go ahead and try. Do what you plan to do. If, while you're doing it, you see that you're actually causing harm, stop. If you don't see any harm, continue. Even when you're done, though, you're not totally done. Look at the long-term results of your actions and freely admit when you've caused harm. If you don't see any harm, then take joy in the fact that you're on the path, and continue training day and night.

In other words, have a very balanced attitude toward what've done right, what you've done wrong. The Buddha said to be ashamed of your mistakes, but this doesn't mean to be ashamed of yourself or to berate yourself. Look at the action, look at the result, and judge it with maturity, with honesty. That's how you learn.

This is characteristic of all skilled meditators: a willingness always to learn. Ajaan Suwat, when he was here toward the last year or two of this time at Wat Metta: Up to that point we'd been doing the chanting in Pali with Thai translations. He turned to me one day and said, "It's about time we started doing it in English around here." So he had me do the English translations we chanted just now. I worked them out. He listened to them, he said okay, and not only that, he learned the English and memorized it. If there was something new he could learn, he was happy to learn it. That's the attitude you want to bring to the meditation. If a mistake is pointed out to you, be happy that it's been pointed out. If you see a mistake yourself, be happy that you've seen the mistake, because that's how you learn.