

Factors for Stream-entry

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The practice of the Dhamma is ultimately aimed at awakening. It was the Buddha's own experience of awakening that formed the basis for the Dhamma he taught, and also the aim of the Dhamma he taught that put an end to suffering. The end of suffering comes only with the experience of awakening, total awakening. But there are stages along the way. Stream-entry is the first. And people like to focus on, "What is it like to be a stream-enterer?" or "What fetters has the stream-enterer put aside? And exactly what does it mean to put these fetters aside, or to be free from them?"

But the real issue is how to get there. Once you get there, then you know the answers to these questions. So the first-order questions should focus on what you do to get there.

There are four factors for gaining stream-entry. Some of them are so basic and ordinary that we tend to overlook them, but it's good to keep them in mind as we practice. The first is associating with people of integrity—the Pali phrase is literally, "true people." The second is listening to the true Dhamma. The third is appropriate attention. And the fourth is practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. These are basic instructions on how to be a good meditator. Even if you're not thinking about the possibility of awakening, you've got to focus on these issues if you want to meditate well: Who are you going to take as your teacher? Who are the people you want to hang around?

We were talking earlier today about the monastic Sangha as the vessel by which the Buddha arranged for his Dhamma to last. You have this arrangement where people can devote their whole lives to the practice, and they're not off hidden in some mountain someplace or behind walls. There are places where laypeople can come and go and associate with them as well. This is important, because if you live totally in a lay life, your perspective on what's important, what's unimportant, gets all skewed. Money is the bottom line; the deadline is a dead line. In other words, there's the word *dead* right in there. You don't meet the deadline, you're dead.

And in a situation like that, it's easy to get like the kids we mentioned this afternoon—the ones who had already run up against the law and were put into the special education program. A psychologist asked them to measure the stressors in their lives on a scale from 1 to 10: "How would you rate, say, the stress of finding that your brother was shot by an opposing gang? Having to choose a dress

to go to see a movie? Deciding what to do after school when one group of friends wants you to go and smoke pot with them, and another group of friends wants to go off and do something else?” In all the cases, the kids said 10,10,10, all the way down the line, no matter what. They were stressing out over everything.

A lot of this comes from not associating with people who can put things into perspective for you, to help teach you how to look at the problems in your life, to realize which ones are important and which ones are not important. If you hang around good people, you begin to pick up a sense of this, even if they don't say specifically what's important and what's not. But the questions they ask, the things they tend to talk about, the way they look at things: You begin to pick that up as well yourself. And that gives you a sense of what's major and what's minor in life, where the big issues are and where the non-issues are.

So that right there is an important element in working toward stream-entry, toward your first taste of awakening: associating with people who have a sense of what's important, have a sense of proportion in their lives. They themselves have made awakening their top priority. Again, there's a lot to learn from hanging around people like that, even if they don't explain things explicitly. You just pick up habits, ways of looking at things from them. And hopefully when you're not associating with them, when you're off away from them, you can carry their attitudes with you.

I remember the experience of coming to America with Ajaan Fuang and seeing America through his eyes. It was a new place, a very different place from the America I had grown up in—partly because it had changed that much, it had been many years since I'd been back to America, but also because of his way of looking at things. I'd look at the places where I grew up, the places I had hung out when I was a young adult. From his perspective he noticed different things. And I realized that having lived with him, I was beginning to see things in a different way as well. So that's an important part of the practice: finding the right people to be with. As the Buddha once said, the whole of the holy life is having admirable friends, colleagues, companions. That's the first of the factors.

The second factor, listening to the true Dhamma: Again, it's good to know how to tell what is true Dhamma and what's not true Dhamma. But also it's good to know how to listen. When you listen to a Dhamma talk, sometimes there will be things that you agree with; sometimes there will be things you don't agree with. But regardless, you want to listen with an attitude of respect, an attitude of openness, that maybe there is something here for you to learn. You don't have to agree with everything, but if you listen with a disrespectful attitude, often the speaker won't want to talk. And even if the speaker does talk, you may miss

something useful. So if you bring some respect to the Dhamma, you have a chance to hear more. And then you have to decide what's true Dhamma and what's not.

That's where the third factor comes in: appropriate attention—learning how to ask the right questions. In particular the Buddha said the test for true Dhamma is when you put it into practice and it leads to certain results. That's what appropriate attention is: looking at things in terms of cause and effect as they play out in your actions. If you take a particular viewpoint and apply it in your life, what's it going to lead you to do? Will it lead to more suffering or to less? That's the big issue right there: asking questions in terms of the four noble truths. What's skillful and unskillful?

So the Dhamma is Dhamma not because you can defend it with rational arguments, or you can put up very elaborate lists of citations that this comes in that passage, and that comes in this passage. Those aren't the criteria that the Buddha mentioned. His first criteria are: If it leads to passion, then it's not Dhamma. If it leads to dispassion then it is. If you take this as a working hypothesis, what happens? Does it lead you to being fettered, to being tied down with certain ways of thinking? Or does it unfetter you? Does it make you lazy or energetic? And so on down the line. You learn to look at things in terms of cause and effect. It doesn't matter whether you like a particular idea, or it seems reasonable. The issue is, if you adopt this as an attitude, as a working hypothesis, as a principle in the practice, where does it lead you? If you see that it leads in the right direction, then you practice that Dhamma in line with it.

Ajaan Suwat once noted that this was one of Ajaan Mun's favorite Dhamma topics: practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. In other words, you don't practice it in line with your likes and dislikes. Or you don't say, "Well, now that we're Americans, the Dhamma is going to have to change to suit us," or whatever. You're more willing to change yourself to fit in with the Dhamma than the other way around.

You might wonder why Ajaan Mun focused on this. Well, it wasn't the case that everyone in Thailand was already practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. Lots of customs had built up in Thai and Laotian Buddhism that he began to realize were really contrary to the message, contrary to the customs of the noble ones. And there was a lot of pressure on him to fit in, in terms of all those customs. So what he was doing in taking the Vinaya out into the woods, practicing in line with the ascetic dhutanga practices, was radical. His justification was, well, this is what the Dhamma is. And the customs of Thailand, and Laos—or of any country—were the customs of people with defilements. If you want to become a noble one, you can't practice in line with those. You can't practice in

line with defilements because that just leads to more defilements, leads to more trouble, leads you away from any hope for awakening. You practice in line with the Dhamma, in line with the customs of the noble ones. When the Dhamma says, “Meditate,” you meditate. When it says to be careful about your actions, what you do, what you say, then you’re careful. You look at your addictions—whatever the addiction is, things you like to do, like to say, like to think—and view them in terms of the Dhamma. “These things: Do they lead to passion or dispassion? Being fettered or unfettered?” If you see that they lead in the wrong direction, you’ve got to drop them. You can’t side with them. You’ve got to learn how to side against your defilements. And it really is a matter of taking sides.

So if you’re interested in awakening, this is how it comes about. You can’t clone awakening. I don’t know how many books there are about what the awakened state is like. The idea is if somehow you can just grok the awakened state, there you’d be. But it doesn’t work that way. You have to work through cause and effect. And these are the causes: associating with the right people, listening to the true Dhamma, developing appropriate attention—learning how to ask the right questions, look at things in the right perspective—and then practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma, rather than in line with your defilements. You do what the Dhamma demands.

That’s how stream-entry comes about, that’s how awakening comes about, that’s how you can put an end to suffering. It may seem very pedestrian, but it is a path to walk. You can’t fly to awakening, you can’t take a rocket, you just walk the path as it is. You’re not too good, you’re not too advanced, you’re not too whatever, to walk. We all have to walk the path. Once you’re willing to submit yourself to the path—i.e., to the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma—that’s when you find out what the Dhamma really is, what its real potential is. That’s how you answer your questions about awakening.