

Precarious Knowledge

November 1, 2007

This evening I was talking on the phone to one of my students, who suffered a stroke last week. She wanted me to give her some meditation instructions for using the breath to heal herself from inside. I know I've given her these instructions before, but to her it seemed like the first time she'd never heard these instructions. It's unnerving to realize how much of our knowledge, how much of who we think we are, is dependent on things that are very unstable and unreliable. The body has to function in a certain way, the brain has to function in a certain way, to maintain that knowledge, and yet we know these things can change.

This is why we need to look for a refuge. We talk about taking refuge in the path, but even the path is uncertain until it's reached the goal. Once the goal is there, then you find a happiness that doesn't depend on these conditions, a well-being that doesn't have to depend on them. In the meantime, though, you're in a pretty precarious position—but what can you do?

If you look for a refuge outside of the path, it's all very uncertain. It's in feelings and perceptions and thought constructs and consciousness, all of which are based on very changeable factors. When I was doing that collection of similes by Ajaan Chah, I noticed he had several similes where talked about the issue of scholarly knowledge versus meditation knowledge, or the approach of, say, Buddhist scholars as opposed to the approach of meditators. Scholars, as he points out, are collecting knowledge, gathering up, whereas when you're meditating, you have to let go. At some point, this means even letting go of your knowledge.

In other words, you can't let abstract ideas or things you've heard come and get in the way of what you're actually doing. You have to be very selective about what you're remembering right here when you meditate, realizing that even the instructions you gain from meditation are things you're going to let go at some point. You hold on to them because they do things to your mind, important things to your mind. They put you in a position where you can find a deathless happiness. And at that point, that's when you let go of even the path.

So it's important to have the right attitude toward the uncertainties of the path. In other words, you realize the knowledge you have about virtue, concentration, discernment, what to do when you meditate, is not something you're going to be able to hold on to forever. So you try to get the most use out of it while you can. There is the opportunity right now. This is why the present moment is so important, not that the present moment is anything special in and

of itself. Getting into the present is not the end of suffering. In fact, the present moment is just as unstable as everything else. But while you're here in the present moment, you can watch the mind in action.

You can even watch your knowledge in action. When you hold a particular view, what does it do to your mind? When you're focused on the breath, what does it do to your mind? You can watch these things as they're happening. You can observe cause and effect to see which ways of thinking, which ways of focusing the mind, are helpful and which ones are not, to see which intentions are skillful and which intentions are not. That's why we come to the present moment, because important things are happening here. Your intentions are shaping your life, and intentions are happening all the time: little ones, big ones, trivial ones, important ones.

This is what's shaping your experience of the present moment. You've got the results of past intentions, you've got the actual present intentions right now, and you've got the results of your present intentions. All these things go together here in the present moment, and you have to try to sort them out. When you're suffering right now as a result of past intentions, present intentions, or both, have you stopped to notice these things? This, the Buddha said, is an important place to look, because you know what happens with your memories of the past. They change into something else. Your anticipations of the future are very uncertain. The only place you can really watch cause and effect in action is right here, right now. That's why we come to the present.

If you just get into the present moment and stop right there, it's like someone getting on to a road and then lying down in the middle of the road. You're going to get run over by aging, illness, and death. You've got to follow the road, which is to understand your intentions, to figure out which ones are skillful, which ones are not, and gradually train them so that they get more and more skillful until ultimately they yield you to something more than just ordinary skillfulness, when the deathless opens up in the mind, when the road gets to the Grand Canyon, and you just take off and fly across the canyon. At that point, you don't need to remember the directions on how to travel the road, because you've got to where you want to go. Your knowledge has done its work.

Ajaan Suwat once said that while you're traveling along the path, you want to make sure that there are no weeds to get in your way, no obstacles to get in your way. But once you've finished the path, then as far as you're concerned, the path can get weedy again. But then you look back and you see other people on the path, so you want to make sure that the path stays as free of obstacles as possible for their sake. In other words, make sure that people have a correct understanding of

what's involved. But for the sake of your own mind, a permanent change has already been made.

That's what the knowledge is good for. We learn things because they do have an effect on the mind, a beneficial effect on the mind. We're not gathering up knowledge of the Dhamma just to decorate our minds, like a library in a den, because when you start opening up the books, you realize that the ink is running off the pages. The message gets all garbled, the nerves in your brain start misfiring, or you just simply forget. In some cases, it's better to forget totally, because a garbled message is worse than no message at all.

So whatever knowledge you've picked up, you realize you can't simply hold on to it for its own sake. You've got to ask yourself: What is this knowledge doing for the mind? How does its effect it? Does it increase your mindfulness? Does it increase your concentration, your discernment? Does it increase your compassion, your equanimity? If it does, make use of the knowledge to do those things to the mind, because you don't know how long it's going to be good. You don't know when its expiry date is going to be. So while your brain is functioning properly, your body is functioning properly, while you've got the opportunity to meditate, make the most of it.

Even when circumstances are not the best—like right now, there's an awful lot of activity going on in the monastery—try to sneak as much meditation into that activity as you can. While you're cooking, while you're packing persimmons, while you're driving around, whatever, you've got your opportunity to develop as much mindfulness and concentration focused on the breath as you can, to make the breath as comfortable as possible, to explore how breath energy works in the body. These are things you can learn, these are things you can observe while you're here, at any time.

As Ajaan Fuang used to say, don't divide your days up into times: the time to eat, the time to work, the time to meditate, the time to whatever. He says, try to make it as timeless as possible. Even while you're eating and working, you can meditate, you can focus on the breath. Try to maintain your inner center, choose a spot in the body that feels comfortable and try to maintain that sense of comfort no matter what you're doing.

An image in the Canon is of a person carrying a bowl full of oil on top of his head, and there's a man following behind him with a raised sword. If he spills even one drop of the oil, the man is going to cut off his head. So the man with the bowl of oil on his head is going to be very mindful of that bowl of oil, to keep it balanced, to keep it full. In the same way, you want to have that sense of at least some spot in your body that you keep balanced and full. Don't let it spill.

Maintain that as you go through the day. And don't think of it as one more extra job to do. This is the spot from which you're coming—you're coming from a state of fullness, a state of ease. How can it not be good? You speak from that sense of fullness, you act from that sense of fullness, you think from that sense of fullness, and your thoughts, your words, and your deeds are bound to be more skillful.

That sense of fullness, as you stick with it is, is bound to have an effect on the mind. This is the kind of knowledge that's really worth holding on to and making the most use of while you've got it. The Buddha points out many times that what your knowledge depends on—your eyes, your ears, your nose, your tongue, your body, your mind, the objects, and sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations: All these things keep turning into something else all the time. However you know things, he says, the means by which you know them are becoming otherwise while you watch. Everything is changing very fast. So if your knowledge and ideas are dependent on changeable things, your knowledge and ideas are going to be changeable, too. So when you learn something that really is useful, that does have a good impact on the mind, put it to use right now, keep putting it to use as long as you can.

This is what the Buddha's last words were: He said, "Develop completion through heedfulness." Having a strong sense of the precariousness of life, the precariousness of your happiness, keeps you on the path, keeps you focused, so that you get the most out of the present moment. It's not just a place to hang out and be. It's a place to do really refined and delicate work. And this work is not burdensome work, it's good work. You come from a sense of well-being, from a sense of fullness. You can see the mind as it becomes more and more skillful. There's a sense of pleasure that comes from the learning skills, seeing the ways you used to act that cause suffering, and appreciating the fact that you're not following those ways any more. You're learning more skillful approaches. All of this should create a sense of well-being and rapture in the present.

So even though the work is continuous, the rewards are continuous as well, if you have the right attitude. So while you've got the opportunity, while your knowledge is clear, while it's effective, try to get the most out of it. Because that's what knowledge is good for: not simply to decorate the walls of your house, but to actually be used as a tool to bring the mind to happiness.