

Step Back

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There's that famous passage where the Buddha says that having good friends, good companions is the whole of the holy life. In the Buddha's explanation, he says to Ananda, if it weren't for the Buddha, we never would have found out about the path. We'd all be groping around.

So our ability to practice depends entirely on his having discovered the path. Without him, this path we're following: I doubt that we'd following it. We'd be off someplace else doing something else, trying to find happiness in some other way.

But the role of having good friends in the practice doesn't end there. There's another passage where the Buddha is talking to Rahula, his son—at the time, Rahula was about seven years old—and he said, if you've done or said anything that you realize has caused harm, go talk over to somebody else more advanced on the path, a good friend in the holy life. This develops good habit, the ability to be open with other people.

Notice, he doesn't say to talk over everything that goes on in your mind. You don't have to mention that to other people, but sometimes it is helpful to get a good perspective. He says this is why we have questions and answers, and why it's good to have a teacher around. Sometimes you can get stuck in your little world and not be able to find a way out. This doesn't mean that every difficulty should be talked over, but you take what skills you've learned, what points of view you've learned, and try to apply them. When you find that you can't get out of that particular state of mind, go over and talk it over, get somebody else's perspective on it.

Choose that person wisely, someone whose wisdom you trust. Try to get a sense of where they're coming from, how they'd step back from their problems as well, so that ultimately you don't have to go and ask. As soon as the question pops up in your mind, you have a good idea: What would the Buddha do? What would the Buddha say? What would Ajaan Lee say? How about Ajaan Chah? Ajaan Maha Boowa? Where would they step back? What perspective would they give on your problems?

This ability to step back is what saves us. Without it, we're totally absorbed in our *bhava*, our little state of becoming, our sense of who we are in the world, confined in the shape and contours of that world. Once you're in a state of becoming like this, you don't see everything. You start out with a kernel of a

particular desire or craving, then you cling to it, and that combination of craving and clinging is the seed around which this world of becoming develops.

On the one hand, there's this sense of who you are, what kind of person you are, based on that craving. As we all know, we have multiple cravings, so we have multiple senses of who we are. Sometimes some of our selves may get down on another one of our selves. Once you have a particular sense of yourself and you look at the world around you, it's colored by what the craving is. You tend to see the things that are relevant to that craving, i.e., the things that help you achieve what you want and the things that get in your way. Other things get totally blotted out.

There's that story of a psych experiment where people were asked to watch kids playing a game with a ball and to try to figure what the rules of the game were. They were very intent on watching the kids, and at some point in the video, a person in a gorilla suit went walking through behind the kids. Then, after the video was over, they asked the people about the person in the gorilla suit. Most of the people didn't see him. They were too intent on watching the game and trying to figure it out. So there are a lot of things going on in the world that you don't see. That's why it's important that you be able to step back.

In the beginning, it's helpful to have somebody else's perspective, because they're in another state of becoming. Or ideally they've learned how to step out of becoming entirely. But at least, they have practice in stepping out. They can tell you what questions to ask, because, it's a question that usually gets you out. There's something you've taken for granted, and you have to learn how to question that. So when you find yourself bound up in a particular state of mind that seems to weigh you down, the first question to ask is, "What are the assumptions I'm going on here?" Try to dig those out. Then learn to question them. Often you'll find that they're things you believe in really intently, and part of the mind will resist the questioning. It says, "Well, of course this is the way things have to be; this is the way you have to look at it."

So you have to question the "of course" ideas, question your "of course" assumptions, starting as a thought experiment. Ask yourself, what would the world be like if you believed the opposite? This was Ajaan Lee's test for anything that came up in meditation. Flip it around, he said. Ask yourself, "What if the opposite was true?" You may not want to believe the opposite, but at least it's getting you out of your original point of view—or point of craving, actually. That can get you past a lot of problems.

Even in the practice of meditation, you have to learn to step back. There's the image of a person sitting watching a person lying down, or of a person standing

watching a person sitting. Learn how to step out of your concentration sometimes to see what's going on and exactly what you're doing.

This is how wisdom and discernment arise in the practice: through your ability to step back. And along with this, you want to develop the ability to laugh at yourself, because that's what stepping back often leads to. You suddenly see how stupid it was to assume what you were holding on to so tightly. There's that phrase in the Greek traditions: "The gods are the ones who laugh," because the gods are stepping back and they watch human beings from a distance. Human beings are so wound up in their tragedies, but the gods are up there laughing. That may sound heartless and cruel, but maybe it's because they've got a different point of view, a better point of view.

There's a long poem in Thai literature about a deva couple who were cursed to fall down to the human realm. The deva husband had tried to use his wife to tempt a hermit out of his concentration, the hermit saw what was happening, and so he cursed them both: "You're going to be born as human beings, you're going to fall in love, and you'll have to be separated three times before you get back up to the deva realm."

That's just the introduction to the poem. The poem goes on for a much longer period of time, as you get to know these two people as human beings, and you get totally involved in their story, which is very sad. They meet each other, they fall in love, they get separated again and again.

The third time they're separated, the guy sees his beloved in the forest, attacked and eaten by a tiger. It turns out that the devas in the forest have made up this vision. She's not actually being attacked, she's not even there. But he sees this and he gets so distraught that he commits suicide. Then she comes along, she finds him dead, and she commits suicide. It's all very sad. The next thing you know, though, they're both back up in heaven, laughing over the whole thing. End of the curse.

The point is, in the world you're inhabiting right now, maybe it's not the whole story. Maybe it's not the actual world of what's really going on. So it's good to be able to talk things over. If you don't have a good teacher immediately around to talk it over with, imagine that you're talking to Ajaan Lee or to Ajaan Fuang: What would they say? How would they look at you if you presented them with your problem? How would they smile and say something that would completely catch you off guard?

That way, you get some perspective on your practice.

So if you develop this ability to step back and cultivate the ability to laugh at yourself, that will often keep you on track.