

Keeping Your Values Alive

January 31, 2012

The Buddha once said there are two factors that are primary in gaining awakening, putting an end to suffering. The primary external factor is having admirable friends, people who are good examples, because you learn not only what they have to say, but also you look at their actions and try to emulate them. You can pick up a lot that way, too.

Their example that it is possible to lead a life that's harmless, a life that leads to the end of suffering, means you can be happy being harmless. That's an important message to hear. You look around. With most people in the world, the examples they set say that if you're going to gain happiness, you've got to gouge this person and take advantage of that one. It's all pretty depressing.

If you can find actual admirable people to be around, that's really helpful. Otherwise, you have to read about the inspiring ajaans, and about the monks and nuns from the Buddha's time. Remember, those were all human beings. They're not just made-up texts from the past, but real live human beings with real live problems. They had suffering just like you. They had all the various weaknesses that you have. But they also had strengths like you have, and they were able to take advantage of those strengths to overcome their own weaknesses. It's an inspiring example.

The primary internal factor that leads to awakening is appropriate attention. That means looking at life in terms of *the* big problem: the fact that there's suffering and stress, and it's caused by things that happen in the mind. So you want to learn how to change those causes so that the mind actually gets on the path to the end of suffering. You learn to look at issues in that way: Where is the stress here? What's causing it? And particularly, what's the mind doing that's causing it?

You have to balance both the internal factors and the external factors because even admirable friends have their failings. You're not going to meet anybody out there who's perfect. Even the great ajaans have personality quirks. You have to learn how to separate out: What's the personality quirk and what's the principle they embody that really is worth emulating? You use appropriate attention to do that. At the same time, if you have a good teacher, a good friend, that person can help point out to you where you're not really paying appropriate attention, or where your understanding of appropriate attention is still lacking.

These are the issues you have to look at as you practice, especially when you're practicing away from a community like this—when you're on your own. Who are the people you're hanging out with? This refers not just to the flesh-and-blood people. There are also the people who write the articles in the magazines and newspapers, and who write the blogs on the Internet, or who write what's being said on TV and the radio. These are the people you hang around with as well. You have to be very selective who you hang out with because often, without thinking, you pick up their values as to what's important in life. In most of these media, the message is that things somebody else is doing someplace else are important. Whereas the message of the Dhamma is that what you're doing right here, right now: That's what's important.

So you've got to learn how to filter out any influences that would pull you away from this point. Try strengthening your appropriate attention. Try to be very articulate in the questions you bring to your practice, to your daily life. What do you want out of the day?

Over the weekend, we were talking about the fact that many of us would like to see closure in our lives. We set certain things into motion—families, projects, relationships—and we'd like to see how they end. Well, the point of the whole teaching on *samsara* is that things don't really end; they just keep wandering on and on and on, going their divergent ways. The only real endpoint, the only real closure is awakening. You can't be in control of whether you're going to live long enough to see even a measure of closure in all these ongoing stories in your life. What you *can* be in control of is what you put into the system: what choices you're making, and what goals you set for yourself in terms of the quality of intention that you're going to apply to any situation.

This is where right resolve is important. The primary resolve is harmlessness, the principle that you don't want to cause harm to yourself or to anyone else. The other two forms of right resolve fall under this. On the one hand, there's the resolve for renunciation. You want to wean yourself away from your sensual addictions because they cause conflict. There's only so much pleasure to go around in terms of sensuality. As the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins, we wouldn't have enough for one person's sensual desires.

All too often, when you want something, somebody else wants it as well, like that story in the newspaper recently where one person wanted to build a new house that was blocking out the other person's view. The first person thought, "Well, this is my property. I can do what I want." The second person said, "Well, that was my view first." Of course, they're both wrong. The property doesn't really belong to the first person; the view doesn't belong to the second. But when

sensuality is uppermost in your mind, uppermost in your life, you start laying claim to all kinds of things that are going to lead to trouble, to conflict.

This is why we practice concentration. This is why it's such an important part of the path and why it's so ironic that, of the eight factors of the path, this is the one that many schools of thought want to drop away. They'd like to have a seven-fold path because concentration is hard. It takes effort. People who find thinking about the Dhamma easy often find it hard to meditate and get the mind to settle down. But it's the concentration that makes all the difference in the world.

When the Buddha discovered the path, right concentration was the first factor of the path that he discovered. He talked about all the other factors in the path as requisites or supports for right concentration because only when the mind is really settled in with a sense of well-being here inside the body can it wean itself away from the dangers of sensuality. There's one passage where the Buddha says that if you don't have the kind of pleasure that can come from right concentration, then no matter how much you may know about the drawbacks of sensuality, you still can't help going back to them, because the mind needs pleasure.

So when we develop concentration as an expression of renunciation, it's not that we're trying to deny ourselves things. We're trying to find a happiness that's better, a happiness that's more solid. This, of course, goes against a lot of what the world has to say. So again, you have to be careful about who you listen to. The problem is not just with the media out there. A lot of therapists will scoff at the idea of renunciation. It's unhealthy, they say. Unnatural.

This attitude, what you might call the attitude of addiction, permeates our culture. When you see the danger of that attitude, you can make mastering concentration an interim goal that's uppermost in your daily life: You want to learn how to find a sense of well-being that doesn't depend on nice sounds, nice sights, nice smells, nice flavors, nice tactile sensations—a sense of well-being that comes simply by breathing and staying settled inside.

The other form of right resolve that's important, of course, is non-ill will, which covers trying to develop goodwill, trying to develop compassion, trying to develop equanimity. When you see a person acting in unskillful ways—people who have harmed you, or harmed people that you love or people that you're concerned about—you can't let yourself give in to ill will no matter how bad that person may be. If you're acting on ill will, it's very likely that you'll do something unskillful. So you have to ask yourself: If that person is behaving in an unskillful way, how you can stop that person without, at the same time, giving in to ill will?

This is where goodwill is crucial. You understand it's not only for your sake, or for the sake of people you love, but also for the sake of that person who's

misbehaving. It would be good for that person to stop. When you think in those terms, then you can start thinking, “Well, what can we do, what can we say to this person that would make that person more likely to stop—want to stop—and see that it’s in his or her best interest to stop?” Goodwill is not being a doormat or being totally passive. It simply means that you’ve got to be more strategic and really think of the well-being of everybody involved when you try to bring about a solution to a problem.

Now, these are attitudes that you can bring into any situation—and attitudes you could be proud to bring into any situation regardless of whether you get to see closure in that situation or not.

So the practice is a matter of learning how to develop these forms of right resolve and, at the same time, not feel taxed, overburdened, or strung out by trying to do the skillful thing.

One of the whole purposes of right concentration is to give you strength. The Buddha’s image is of the food in a fortress. The soldiers in the fortress have to fight off the enemy. Mindfulness, the guardian at the gate, has to keep the sneaky spies away—in other words, your unskillful thoughts and unskillful influences from inside and out. The soldiers of your right effort have to fight off the enemy that’s trying to climb up the walls. Both the guardian and the soldiers need food. That’s what’s provided by right concentration. That’s why this is such an important part of the path.

At the same time, you have to remember what you’re fighting for. You’ve got certain values that are going to be contrary to the values of society at large. This is true in every society into which Buddhism has spread. It’s just that our society is so much in your face. You go home and there are these boxes in which the outside world is just available, and it’s so easy to get sucked into the boxes, or the tablets, or whatever shape they’re in now. You have to be very careful about where you go and what you explore, not only your physical space but also in cyberspace, in TV space, in radio space.

Learn to take the attitude of an anthropologist: “This culture is very strange.” To keep your sanity, listen to the Dhamma as much as you can. Try to associate with people of right view as much as you can so that you can keep your values alive. In this way, the technique of right concentration helps support your right views and right attitudes, and your right views and attitudes help give you support for your concentration. As the Buddha points out, as right resolve develops, it becomes one with the concentration. All the factors of the path come together.

So the practice is not just doing a technique. It's also realizing why the practice is important, why you need it, how you can apply it, and how you can create an environment in which you can grow.

You really do want to take charge of your life. After all, it's going to either cause you suffering or bring you happiness. That's the big issue in life, and you want to make sure that it has priority in all your considerations. Don't let other people's priorities come in and push this one out of the way.