

Wisdom as a Tool

May 9, 2012

We're fortunate in our practice that we've got a lot of good guidance. We've got the Buddha's teachings, the teachings of noble disciples, and of the great ajaans. But even so, as we sit down to meditate, for each of us it's a process of discovery—in the same way that Columbus discovered America. It wasn't really lost. A lot of other people knew that America was there, but he didn't know, and so when he came across it, for him it was a discovery. And it's the same for us as we sit down to meditate. In one way we're going over a territory that other people have gone over many, many times before. But for us it's new. And in that sense we have to learn how to be our own teachers, our own guides. We have to learn how to be our own mainstay.

As the Buddha said, the self is its own mainstay, so a lot of the practice is learning how to be a reliable mainstay for yourself so that when something happens in your meditation, you have a sense of how reliable it is. If you're not reliable, you won't know when anything or anyone else is reliable—which means that you have no mainstay at all.

In this area it's good to learn from people who had to do a lot of exploring on their own—people like Ajaan Mun or Upasika Kee. They received training as they started out, but then they learned that there were a lot of areas where they had to explore on their own. In Ajaan Mun's case he had a lot of psychic knowledge, which his teacher Ajaan Sao didn't have. And Ajaan Sao told him that he was going to have to learn how to find his own way through that challenge and not get thrown off course.

There are two primary lessons that he relied on. One I learned from Ajaan Fuang, which was that whatever comes up in your meditation in terms of a vision, you don't try to figure out—when, say, you see or hear someone speaking to you—Is this a real deva? Or whatever. The question is, is the lesson they're teaching a good Dhamma lesson? That's always what you should be looking for: What kind of Dhamma lesson could you gain from this? It doesn't

matter who you see in the vision. What matters is the quality of what they tell you.

And this applies to books as well. A particular Dhamma lesson may be good for somebody at some time, but it's not necessarily good for you right now. So you have to learn how to judge.

Similarly, when an insight comes into your mind, the first question should be, "What kind of impact does it have?" If you took that insight as true, how would it influence your actions?

This comes under the principle of appropriate attention: figuring out, Is this going to help you understand suffering? Is it going to help you abandon craving? Will it help you develop the path? Those are the questions you want to ask.

Ajaan Lee had a student, a woman who worked in the palace for many years. She had listened to many, many of the great sermon-givers in Bangkok in her time. When she was told by one of her teachers to go to listen to Ajaan Lee, her first thought was: "What does he know that I don't know? He's been living all of his life out in the woods. And here I've been in Bangkok and have listened to all the great sermon-givers." But she went and listened anyhow. And she found she learned a lot of things she had never learned before.

He taught her how to meditate, and she turned out to be somewhat psychic in a variety of ways. Once, in one of her meditation sessions, she had a vision, and then a voice accompanied the vision saying, "This was when you were living in Jetavana." When she came out of mediation she thought, "Jetavana. I know that name. I've heard it before, but what is it?" It took her three days to remember that Jetavana was the monastery where the Buddha lived for many years.

But instead of getting excited that she had a memory of a previous lifetime and may have once lived at Jetavana, she took the vision as a lesson in how unreliable your memory is. For most of her life she'd been chanting suttas that had taken place in Jetavana, and yet she was still able to forget it. Instead of coming to a conclusion as to whether the vision was true, she took it as a Dhamma lesson: See how inconstant your perceptions are. That's making good use of a vision.

As for insights that come, Ajaan Fuang used to say, “Don’t try to memorize them. You’re not here to write a book. If an insight comes, try to apply it right now and see what impact it has. If it’s not relevant to what’s happening right now,” he said, “just forget it. It will come back when you need it, if it’s an insight that’s actually going to be useful. But the insight is to be measured by its immediate impact, what it does.” Wisdom after all is strategic. So ask yourself: How would you take that insight and use it as a strategy?

Ajaan Lee had a useful piece of advice for making sure that insights don’t get you carried away. He said, if you gain an insight, ask yourself to what extent the opposite is true. Look at things with two eyes, and not just one. If you take an insight that’s true only in some cases, and try to apply it everywhere, you’ve abandoned your sense of judgment. You’ve lost sense of time and place. Remember that only the four noble truths are true everywhere, so use wisdom in how you interpret the limits of the insights you’ve gained.

Ajaan Mun had another piece of advice, which you can read about in Ajaan Maha Boowa’s account of Ajaan Mun’s passing away. Ajaan Maha Boowa was feeling really abandoned after Ajaan Mun’s death, and then he remembered a piece of advice that Ajaan Mun had given him many times: When something comes up in your meditation that you’re not sure about, just watch it. Stay with a sense of the knower, or just bare awareness. Don’t jump to any conclusions. Just watch to see where it goes. And that way you come out safe. Again, it’s a lesson in not jumping to conclusions.

As for Upasika Kee, one of her favorite pieces of advice was to remember that there are many layers in your mind. Just because you gain an insight in one layer doesn’t mean that all your work is done. You have to watch for what happens next. In other words when you let go of something, what comes up in its place? Is there any pride? If there is, see if you can let go of that. If you let any pride or conceit build up around an attainment or an insight, then you’ve blinded yourself. So as soon as something comes up that seems important, watch what happens next in the mind.

You notice that all these pieces of advice teach you to be very careful about causality, learning to see all things—even your most

profound insights—simply as part of a causal process. What happens after the insight? What can the insight be used for? If you're not sure if it's reliable, step back. Don't get involved. Keep watching, watching, watching. We're here in the present moment not because it's a great place to be. We're here because it's one of the best places to watch things as they unfold, before you slap labels on them, such as "This is me" or "This is mine or somebody else's" or "This is a great insight" before you start conjuring up all the processes of becoming around them. Learn to see things as events, as they come, as they go, as they give rise to other events—particularly so that you can see where you're adding any unnecessary suffering, to see what your intentions are doing, what your attention is doing, how you pay attention to things. Is it helping you to alleviate suffering? Or is it going to add any more on?

So it's not that we're just accepting things. We actually have to pass judgment. And you need some guidance in how to pass judgment. This is one of the reasons why we develop mindfulness and concentration. We're trying to develop the mind that the Buddha said is like earth or like fire. It doesn't shrink back from disgusting things and doesn't get excited about pleasant things. It's a mind willing to watch patiently. You want the sense of patience that allows you to see things all the way from cause to effect. And then after the effect, what's the effect after that? And what's the effect after that? Keep watching so that you can start seeing through all the layers in the mind. After all, we're not here just to be in the present moment. We're here to dig down into the present moment.

The Buddha's teachings on kamma contain a riddle. Our experiences depend to some extent on the past, but we also have this ability to choose in the present moment. We have a certain amount of freedom in our choices. But what is that freedom? Why is it there? How can we make the most use of it? That's where you want to look, so that you can peel away the various layers, and go through the present moment into something that really is deathless.

When the Buddha talked about the deathless, he wasn't talking just in metaphorical terms. There's a dimension that doesn't die.

Anything that's in space and time is going to die at some point. Even stars die. Here I'm not talking about movie stars—I'm talking about stars up in the sky. Galaxies get sucked into black holes, and who knows what happens to black holes? But there is a deathless dimension that's something you can touch in the mind that's not subject to any of that change. It's not in the present, in the sense of being in time. Sometimes people talk as if the present were somehow out of time. Actually, the present moment is very much in time. But when you dig down into the present, you find something that's outside of that dimension.

So you have to remember that your insights are tools for doing that digging. We're here not to gather up insights that we can take home and put in a scrapbook. Wisdom is not the aim of the practice. Wisdom is one of the tools of the path. And a large part of that wisdom is learning how to use your tools properly. Learn how to make yourself a reliable mainstay so that you can judge, when something happens, whether it's useful or not.

And keep these lessons in mind, so that whatever comes up doesn't pull you off the path. You learn how to govern your own practice, evaluate your own discoveries. Because when you come right down to it, even if you had the Buddha sitting here right in front of you telling you what to do, you would still have to decide whether he was reliable or not. You'd have to figure out what he was saying, how it applied.

So despite all the help we have, we need to keep coming back to ourselves. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha said, "Let someone come who is observant and honest, who is no deceiver, and I will teach that person the Dhamma." Basically, when he says that, he's telling you to look in yourself for what you're going to need in order to learn the Dhamma. You have to be observant and you have to be no deceiver. You have to be honest with yourself. The Buddha gives you lessons in how to develop those qualities, but you're the one who has to apply those lessons. You're the one who has to judge the results. Did you apply them well? If you have a teacher living nearby, the teacher can help, looking from the outside, noticing if you're carrying around any obvious blind spots. But even then you have to be the responsible one. And the good news is that you can. Just learn how to do it well.