

Undividing the Mind

January 21, 2013

Everyone comes to meditation with a divided mind. Part of the mind wants to meditate, and the other part has other plans, other agendas. And it's not just two parts; there are lots of parts. So you have to recognize this fact and be prepared for it.

One of the ways is to remind yourself of all the dangers that come when you don't meditate, and the other way is to remind yourself of all the benefits that come when you do. They say that people who excel at a physical skill—and we're not just talking about doing it well; we're talking about doing it *exceptionally* well—are the ones who have a very strong sense that if you master the skill, there are a lot of benefits that come. But if you get sloppy even the least little bit, there are going to be dangers.

So you want to bring that attitude to the meditation. This is why some of the chants we have before the meditation deal with aging, illness, death, separation, the fact that the world is swept away, does not endure, offers no shelter, and there's no one in charge. That narrows your attention down to what you're doing right now. As one of the contemplations adds: We're heirs to our actions; whatever good or evil we're going to meet with in life come from our actions. Where do your actions come from? They come from the mind. So you really do want to train the mind.

The positive contemplations are the ones to remind yourself of what the Buddha was able to attain, what the noble disciples were able to attain. This is something really special. We're fortunate that his teachings are still alive. The teachings of a Buddha don't last forever, you know. The Dhamma is always the same, but the fact that it's been expressed and passed on from generation to generation: That's something that happens at some times and not at others. We happen to be in an era when the Buddha's teachings are still being passed on—and not just in the words. There's the apprenticeship. What you might call the guild is still very much alive.

So there is the opportunity to train. As the Buddha said, the qualities that led to his awakening, his realization that there was a deathless happiness—things like ardency, resolution, heedfulness—weren't his exclusive possessions. We all have them to some extent, and we have the potential to develop them. So the opportunity's here; the potential is here. You can use those thoughts to put you in a positive frame of mind. Then it's simply a matter of learning how to apply them

at the appropriate times and to develop an enthusiasm for your meditation object, an enthusiasm for the training, along with a sense of wariness and heedfulness around anything that would pull you away.

As the Buddha said, heedfulness is the basis of everything that's skillful. In other words, you see there are dangers both outside and in your mind. *But* if you're careful, you can avoid those dangers. If the dangers were totally unavoidable, heedfulness wouldn't mean anything. You could take all the care in the world and you'd still suffer from the dangers. But here you can make a difference. You've got the opportunity right now, and you've tried everything else. Think back over the many lifetimes that you've devoted to all kinds of other things. Here's an opportunity to focus directly on the mind, to train the mind and then test the Buddha's claims: Are they really true? Are they something you can give rise to within yourself? Can you prove him right or wrong?

It's an important issue, the possibility of a true happiness, a happiness that doesn't have to depend on conditions and can be attained through human effort. His announcement of that possibility is a challenge, and here's your opportunity to take on that challenge.

So look at this as a special time, a special opportunity to do something really worthwhile. If your enthusiasm flags, well, think about the dangers of *not* finding this kind of happiness and the regret you'd feel that it's there, it's a possibility, but you didn't take it.

There's a story in the Canon of a man who had many opportunities to practice. But he kept turning them down, turning them down—finding other things to do. And he finally passed away. After he passed away, the Buddha commented that if he had gone on the path early in life, he would have become an arahant. Even if he'd gone on the path late in life, he would have become a stream enterer. But he threw those possibilities away. It's a chilling story.

One of the forest ajaans says that the proper response to all this is to give it everything you've got. This doesn't mean that you have to strain yourself to the point of exhaustion every day. It means you have to use all of the strengths you have—the strength of conviction, the strength of persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment—to figure out: What is the appropriate right effort right now? How much effort? What kind of effort? That way you won't feel the regret later on that maybe if you'd developed those strengths a little bit more, they would have taken you further.

Again, it's not a matter of brute strength or brute effort. It's *wise* effort, which in many ways is more difficult than simple brute effort. With brute effort, you can just push, push, push, push, push without having to think or observe much at all.

But with wise effort, you have to figure out: What's the appropriate thing right now? How much is just right? How much is properly focused effort? As with any practice, it's not just the amount of practice, but it's when you're practicing, what you focus on. There's a book on learning to be a good swimmer that makes the point: It's not a matter of how many hours you put into swimming, but more a matter of maintaining proper form all the way throughout the time you *do* swim. If you put in lots of hours but your form is bad, it's actually going to be bad for your swimming. Sometimes it's better to put in just a few laps but with very good form.

So you have to use all your intelligence all around to figure out how much and what and how is the right effort right now—the effort that makes use of your discernment and, as you develop the effort, develops your discernment. This is a very important skill. And always keep that in mind: It is a skill. This is why we have the apprenticeship where it's not just a matter of reading books and deciding on your own what the Dhamma means. A lot of the Dhamma I learned in Thailand had nothing to do with what I was reading; it was all just being around Ajaan Fuang. It wasn't his Dhamma talks or even his Dhamma conversations. Sometimes just seeing him in action and allowing him to see me in action was an important part of the training.

As for the guild, which is the Ssangha, I was reading recently about Benvenuto Cellini and how he'd broken from the guild of goldsmiths in the late middle ages because he thought he was way more talented than everybody else. And he wanted to promote himself as the Michelangelo of gold. He did some amazing things, but in the course of his career he discovered that without the guild to support him, he had to please public opinion. Now he tried his best to shape public opinion through his writings. But he kept running up against the problem again and again and again that if he wanted to survive as an artist, he had to find people who would pay for his creations—and he had to please them. There's a story of a Spanish king who'd commissioned a crucifix from Cellini and decided he wanted to add a little fig leaf to the crucifix. Cellini complained, "What are you doing to my work of art?" And the king said, "What do you mean, *your* work of art? I paid for it. It's mine."

This is what happens with the Dhamma when it becomes a source of livelihood for people who don't belong to the guild. Whoever pays the piper determines what songs are being played. It's one of the reasons why having the guild is an important part of the practice, an important part of the training: There's a standard that's maintained. There may be a lot of mediocre members of the guild. But the guild does provide the opportunity to practice without the

pressure to have to teach before you're ready, or to teach what's going to be immediately pleasing to people.

So it means the opportunity is here. The support is here. All that's needed is your determination to make the most of it.