

Limitless is the Buddha

August 10, 2013

One of the themes that Ajaan Mun would often focus on in his Dhamma talks would be practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. This phrase means many things. One is that you don't try to change the Dhamma to suit your preferences. Instead, you try to bring your preferences in line with the Dhamma—realizing that what the Buddha said was true: that the big problem in life is the stress and suffering we cause for ourselves through our clinging and craving, and so that's the problem we have to focus on. If you start changing the Dhamma in line with your preferences, you're actually giving more rein to the clinging and craving. And that kind of practice simply aggravates the problem.

So you ask yourself: Are you willing to put your preferences aside for right now and give yourself to the practice? The thoughts you like to think about and other things that lie outside the path, you're going to put them down for the time being. And you're going to focus right here. Fortunately, the work required by the path is not all unpleasant. There are times when it requires that you put up with some pain and you have to exercise some restraint over your clings and cravings. There's going to be some resistance. But what does the path ask you to do? Noble things: generosity, virtue. When you meditate, you develop a sense of wellbeing inside that doesn't harm anybody at all. And that's just the path. The goal is even more harmless, more noble, as in that phrase we chanted just now: admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end. The path starts out well, continues well, and it's ending is something highly admirable.

So try to develop a sense of conviction and confidence in what you're doing here, that this really is good work—both in the sense that the work itself is pleasant—you're not asked to do anything demeaning, you're not asked to harm anybody else—and in the sense that where it leads is also a very good goal.

Start out by trying to breathe in a way that feels really good, really satisfying inside. You're going to be giving up a number of other pleasures as you practice, but the compensation is you can develop a sense of wellbeing being right here, breathing in, breathing out, simply being very sensitive to the process of breathing. And you're totally free to breathe any way you like. The Dhamma doesn't say you have to breathe long, or breathe short or whatever. Here is one area where your preferences can reign for the time being. What kind of breathing do you want to focus on now? What kind of breathing would you like to create for yourself to focus on? Go ahead and create it.

As you do this, you're learning an important lesson: There's a fair amount in the present moment that you can shape. So, shape it in a good direction. Turn it into a path, something that goes someplace. So many pleasures are not paths at all. You experience them and then they're gone, that's it. Or even worse, as you're experiencing them, you're developing a lot of unskillful attitudes around them. Those attitudes are a path in the wrong direction. But here,

you're developing a pleasure, a sense of well-being that's harmless, and you're using it to make the mind clearer, to make the mind sharper, more firmly balanced, more firmly stable here in the present moment. It's good work.

And if at first you don't succeed, then try, try again. In other words, if the mind slips off, just let go of whatever has pulled it away and you're right back at the breath. Pay more attention to the breath this time and also keep an eye out for any warning signs that the mind is about to slip away again. This requires a quality called ardency: that you put effort, you put your heart, into doing it well.

Part of ardency is motivated by the realization that if you don't train the mind, there's going to be trouble, both now and on into the future. But there are other ways of motivating your ardency as well. One of them is having a sense of conviction that the people who found this path and have been carrying it on, transmitting it from generation to generation, are to be respected. Think about the Buddha: He was really serious about happiness. When he had found a true happiness, he was really serious about doing a good job of passing that skill on to other people. It's hard to find teachers like that. So many teachers are pleased just to please other people. It's a lot easier to tell people what they like and they reward you. But the Buddha was not motivated in that way. He seriously wanted to do something that was of genuine benefit for many generations of people, that really would make a difference, to help them put an end to their suffering. If they followed the path, that was his reward.

You can also look at the example of all the really inspiring people who picked up that teaching and used it well. We owe them a debt of gratitude. We can also take them as good examples, because they faced a lot of dangers, they faced a lot of pain, and they can be our inspiration as we go through our own difficulties in the practice.

There's a passage where one of the Buddha's students is out in the wilderness and he's sick. And he asks himself, "What am I going to do? Am I going to go back home? NO – I'm going to stay right here and devote myself to the Dhamma, using the mind to overcome the illness and being inspired by all the people who have done this in the past." This is one of the reasons why it's good to read the biographies of the great teachers, beginning with the verses of the elders monks, the elder nuns, and on up to the present. They give you an idea of what human beings can do.

And then you practice.

This is what devotion is: It's not that you're trying to please somebody up there by groveling in front of them. We think about the Buddha's kind intentions and all the effort he went into in finding this path, and we show our gratitude, our devotion, by keeping the path open through our practice. Over the centuries, there have been times when the path has been overgrown with weeds and yet people have come along and cleared away the weeds. It required a lot of work.

Think about Ajaan Mun and all the work he had to go through, all the difficulties he encountered in establishing for himself the fact that, yes, this path still works. Most of the teachings coming out of Bangkok in those days said that the time for nibbana—even the time for jhana practice—was over. Monks should lower their sights, they said, and help the government set up schools. Ajaan Mun also got a lot of flak from other people for not

practicing in the traditional Thai way. But as he said, the traditions of Thai culture, as with the traditions of every culture, are the traditions of people with defilements. If you want a noble happiness, you have to follow the standards of the noble ones, the culture of the noble ones: learning contentment with outside things. And that can often mean accepting the fact that other people don't respect you, they don't like your practice, and yet you can learn to finding your delight, not in the things other people can offer, but in developing good qualities of mind, skillful qualities of mind, and abandoning unskillful ones. The sense that you've done something skillful in your thoughts or your words or your deeds: Learn to take delight in that. When you're tempted to do something really unskillful but you're able to say No: Take delight in that, too. It's so easy when you feel temptation to give into those voices that say, "Well, you might be saying No right now but you're going to Yes tomorrow, you're going to say Yes in five minutes, so why don't you say Yes now and get it over with." You have to learn how to see through that trick: Tell yourself, "In five minutes I'll make the decision for five minutes, but right now the decision is No." And each time you can say No like that, you're strengthening the mind—strengthening the mind and learning to take delight in the fact that you're strengthening the mind. That way you find it easier to put up with whatever hardships are involved in the practice.

The Buddha concedes that you don't need to deny yourself any pleasures that are in line with the Dhamma. But if you find that indulging in external pleasures is creating unskillful habits—or even just hanging around in the pleasures of concentration when you should be ready to move on, if you see that happening—you've got to exert extra effort, which may involve pain. So learn how to delight in that. Don't make it the kind of extra effort where you're just gritting your teeth. Find some way to psych yourself up for this.

And one of the ways to do that, of course, is to think about the fact that the Buddha really was an admirable human being and there are so few admirable people in this world. You should treasure those that are. That passage we chanted just now – the Buddha is immeasurable. The qualities of mind that he developed, the goal at the end of the path that he was able to attain: There's no measure for that. So we're dealing with something that's bigger than an ordinary human being. The Dhamma is also immeasurable; the Sangha is immeasurable. Their qualities are bigger than anything else you can think of in this life. They're not only bigger than creeping things outside, but they're bigger than creeping things inside – the creeping defilements and the creeping unskillful qualities that keep eating away at your potential for true happiness.

So as you're trying to stay here with the breath, use these thoughts as motivation for doing it well, giving it more of yourself than you might ordinarily do. This is something that