

What Are You Doing?

October 22, 2017

Ajaan Fuang once received a letter from a Dhamma practitioner in Singapore who talked about his practice of Dhamma in daily life, how whatever he was doing at work, at home, even watching TV, he just tried to notice how everything was impermanent, suffering, not-self. And Ajaan Fuang told me to write back to him and say that the problem is not with the TV or your work or home, the problem is inside the mind. Don't go criticizing the world out there. Start looking at what's wrong with your own mind, the part of the mind that's criticizing the world.

It's an important point. The problem is what the mind is doing. It's not with things outside.

There is an emphasis that's developed over the centuries in different branches of Buddhism to focus on how things are empty or are marked by the three characteristics, saying that the problem is that we want them to be permanent but they're not, we want them to have substance but they're not. Well, permanence and substance may be issues sometimes, but they're not the only issues, or even the main issue. The mind has lots of other issues with things outside.

Often we're attached to things not because we think they're permanent or have a substance but simply because we think that the pleasure we get out of them is worth the effort that goes into getting it. People get married realizing that the marriage is not going to last forever. There are all kinds of things that people hold onto in full knowledge that they're not going to last forever, yet they still hold on and they still suffer. It's in the way they hold on: That's the problem.

The motivation to create experiences that they will then hold onto: That's what the real problem is. We're not simply passive observers of the world around us. We're out there actively creating large parts of it. Our states of becoming come from within. So we have to turn around and look at this problem inside: "What is your mind doing?"

No matter what the problem is, the problem that makes the mind suffer is something the mind is doing. This is why, in the practice of mindfulness, alertness means that you're in the present moment not watching just whatever comes up but specifically what you're doing and the results of what you're doing. As Ajaan Lee once said, if you see causes without effects, it's not discernment. If you see effects without causes, it's not discernment. You have to see the connections between the causes and effects. That's discernment.

Which means that you have to be alert to these things. So whatever the problem is that you're going to encounter in your meditation—whether it's distraction or pain—the problem is not so much the pain or the distraction. It's the way the mind wants to get involved, the way it *is* involved with it. You have to figure out how to disinvolve it, how to get it unconnected from that.

Take apart the way it perceives its things and relates to the things. That's when you can let go.

For instance, when you're going to deal with pain, it's not simply a matter of noting that the pain is there. You have to ask questions about it. And the questions have to do with, "What are you doing?"

Of course, with the pain, what you're doing is the perception along with the way you're paying attention to it and the stories you bring to it and all the other issues around the pain that you add to the pain. All too often they're things we've been doing so often that we don't notice them. We think that they're part of the pain—or part of the way the mind *has* to react to the pain. But it doesn't have to react in those ways. It doesn't have to perceive the pain the way it does.

Ajaan Maha Boowa has a lot of good ways of questioning your relationship to the pain, questioning your understanding of the pain, your perception of the pain. Perception seems to be the big issue for a lot of the forest ajaans. In dealing with pain, perception is the issue. In dealing with the issue of the unattractiveness of the body, why is it that you can be focused on the unattractiveness of the body for an hour or so and then suddenly switch? All of a sudden the body is attractive again. What happened? The body didn't change. It was your perception that changed.

The same with the pain. Sometimes you come to the pain with a lot of stories around why it's not fair that that pain is there, and/or you may be feeling bad about yourself. Maybe this pain is punishment for something—all kind of weird things the mind can carry on, even if it's just basically noting the pain and the fact that it's there. What image do you have in mind? What perception are you carrying that you've slapped onto the pain—the perception you're looking at rather than looking at the actual pain? Is the pain solid? Has it taken over that part of your body? Is it the same thing as that part of the body? Is it lodged in your mind? Look to see if you can detect that none of those perceptions are true.

And try to replace those perceptions with other perceptions, more skillful ones: the perception of the pain as just points, or that it's a different level of energy from the body. It seems to be in the same place, but just as radio waves from different stations can be in the same place, carrying different messages on a different frequency, the pain is a different frequency from the body. Can you see that? Or can you perceive the pain as going away from you? These little

moments of pain as they arise: As soon as they arise, they go away. As soon as they arise, they go away. They're not coming at you.

These questions may sound a little strange, but the mind has a lot of strange attitudes around pain. That's why it holds onto the pain even though it doesn't like it. It's developed a range of perceptions that it felt would keep pains under control, but often those perceptions can then get in the way. And a lot of those perceptions come from a time when you hadn't yet learned a language, so they're pre-verbal and can be very strange. So you have to ask strange questions in order to expose them and dig them out.

So when you're sitting with pain, dealing with pain, it's not simply a matter of going along and bearing with it. It requires asking yourself, "How am I relating to this?" This is where alertness comes in the mindfulness practice, and where your evaluation comes in as the mindfulness shades into right concentration: evaluating what you're doing, the results you're getting—making that your major focus.

Remember that we're not just passive observers watching things just going on their own. They may have their own way of going on their own, but we have *our* way of meddling with them. If we didn't meddle with them, we wouldn't be aware of them at all. It's our meddling that makes us aware of these things to begin with.

As the Buddha said, all dhammas are rooted in desire. This doesn't mean that the world out there is caused by your desire, but that your experience of the world is very strongly shaped by your desires. And you have the choice as to what kind of desires you want to go with: the desires that continue to create suffering or the desires that become part of the path.

So, as we have the problem of suffering, we're not innocent. We're implicated. And it's simply a matter of learning how to accept that fact and have respect for that fact: That's when we can do something about it.

When the Buddha learned the path to awakening, it wasn't necessarily the path that he thought he wanted. It revealed things about himself he didn't necessarily like to see, but when the truth came up that he was implicated in this, that he was responsible for a lot of this, he learned how to respect that fact. He didn't try to deny it. He didn't try to run away from it or turn it into something else.

The suttas tell us that after his awakening he asked himself, "Who should I hold in respect?" He didn't see any human being or any deva or anybody of that sort that he could hold as an object of respect, but he said, "There is the Dhamma." And "Dhamma" here doesn't mean the words that he taught, but rather the truth he had found. And it was because he was willing to respect that truth to begin with: That's why he found it.

And when the Dhamma as mirror, as he often says, it's showing you: "This is what your mind is doing wrong." You want to learn to respect that, because the problem is precisely where we'd rather not look or where we'd rather not assign blame. Actually, it's not so much a matter of blame as simply responsibility. Until we stop resisting that, we're not going to see anything.

So. "What are you doing?" That's the question you should be asking yourself all the time. That and, "Do you like the results?" Learn to have very high standards as to what you're going to like and not like in terms of the results. That's how these questions can take you far.