

Alighting on the Dhamma

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The question sometimes comes: Why is it that in the time of the Buddha people could listen to the Dhamma and gain stream-entry after one Dhamma talk, whereas nowadays, you listen to hundreds of Dhamma talks and nothing seems to happen? The Buddha addresses the issue. He says if you want to alight on the true Dhamma while listening, you need five qualities.

The first is that you don't despise the speaker. Second, you don't despise the Dhamma itself that's being taught. In other words, you don't put up any resistance to it; you let it come in. Third, you don't despise yourself. In other words, you don't tell yourself, "This Dhamma is way beyond me. There's no way I can take it in. There's no way it's really talking about what's going on in my mind right now."

As the Buddha said, the whole point of the Dhamma is that it points. That's what the word *desana* means in Pali. It's the Pali word for Dhamma talk, and it actually means pointing to the Dhamma. And it's pointing into your mind, because that's where the real Dhamma lies. The words outside are not the true Dhamma. The true Dhamma is what's developing in your mind. So have some confidence that when the Buddha's talking about the five aggregates, he's talking about things you know. When he talks about the four bases for success, these are qualities you've developed to at least some extent. And you can build on them now.

The fourth quality is that you're single-minded. The word for singleness, *ek'aggata*, is sometimes translated as one-pointed. *Eka* means one, but *agga* doesn't necessarily mean point. It can also mean gathering place. In this case, you gather your whole mind around one topic, whatever is being taught, and you don't wander off.

Then you practice appropriate attention. That's the fifth quality. Appropriate attention is where you take what you've been listening to and ask yourself, "How does this apply to the question of suffering? Is the Buddha talking about suffering itself, or is he talking about the cause of suffering? Or the path? And how does this apply to me? What am I doing right now that's suffering? What am I doing that's causing suffering? What could I be doing? What could I change, so that instead of causing suffering, I'm leading away from suffering?"

So you're focused but questioning at the same time. The questioning is directed by what you're learning. You have the confidence that what you're learning really is giving you information that you need or that you can benefit from.

This way, as you look inside, you see things you may not have seen before. This is one of the reasons why we listen to the Dhamma. It's like the vocabulary of tasters. Their education is not just a matter of smelling a lot of smells and tasting a lot of tastes. It also involves learning a precise vocabulary to describe those smells and tastes. When you see that there is such a thing as a precise vocabulary, you begin to notice tastes you didn't taste before, or you've tasted them, but you didn't notice them.

Or with music: We've got a twelve-tone scale here in the West. It sounds natural to us, and we feel as if there were nothing in between the tones. But there are other cultures where they have twenty-four tones in a scale, including the tones in the cracks between the piano keys. As you listen to their music for a while, you begin to hear them as distinct tones. In the same way, the Buddha's helping you to look at things distinctly inside the mind. There are skillful events and unskillful events happening there. Once you notice they're skillful or unskillful, then you know what to do. If something is skillful, you try to develop it. If it's unskillful, you try to abandon it. All this comes under appropriate attention.

Now, we don't have the Buddha with us now. We can read some of the talks he gave to other people, but we don't know what he would be saying to us if he were here talking to us. Still, when you meditate, you can bring the same five qualities to your own meditation, because you're listening to the Dhamma inside now. It requires the same five qualities in order for you to grow and benefit from it.

You don't despise who's speaking Dhamma inside. But you do have to train the voices. This is why the Buddha said that the first step of right concentration includes directed thought and evaluation. It's not as if you haven't been doing directed thought and evaluation, and suddenly you have to do it to get concentrated. You've been doing it all along. It's your internal chatter, which is the basis for all speech. What we're trying to do as we meditate is to direct the inner conversation in the right direction, to a single purpose. Talk about things that are actually helpful. Learn how to evaluate what's going on, say with the breath. How does the breath feel right now? What kind of breathing would feel best? If you don't know, try things out. Have something you can compare. Try longer breathing for a while, then try shorter breathing. Compare the two. It's through comparisons that you see things.

I have a book of photography where the photographer has two pictures for every scene: a larger one, which he says is the better picture, and then a smaller one, which is similar, but not quite the same and not quite as good. He explains why he chose the larger one. And looking at the two photos, you really

do learn about color, warmth, and composition. You learn lessons you wouldn't have learned otherwise.

It's the same here. Talk to yourself about the breath and try some different ways of breathing. Learn how to compare and observe. This way, you train that speaker inside to become more and more reliable, and you're less likely to trash what observations you've made.

Second, don't despise the Dhamma. The Buddha was very careful to phrase things well. This is why we say, "*Svakkhato bhagavata dhammo*," the Dhamma is well taught by the Blessed One. He really did teach it well. He phrased it rightly, presented it rightly. So take what Dhamma we've got and apply it to yourself. In the forest tradition, they call that the principle of practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. In other words, you don't change the Dhamma to suit the time or the place, other people's opinions or your own opinions. You try to change yourself to be in line with the Dhamma.

That connects with the next principle: Don't despise yourself. Remind yourself that you can do this. As the Buddha said, if people couldn't practice the Dhamma, he wouldn't have taught it. If you couldn't stop doing unskillful actions, thoughts, words, and deeds, if you couldn't start doing skillful ones in their place, there would be no purpose in his teaching. But this is something human beings can do. Think of Ven. Ananda's recommendations on conceit. He says we practice to overcome conceit, but we need to use some conceit—skillful conceit—in the practice. The conceit he's recommending is the thought, "Other people have gained awakening. They can do it, why can't I?"

When you have this confidence in yourself, confidence in the Dhamma, then you give it your full attention. Here as you're meditating, you want to bring that quality of *ek'aggata*, singleness, to bear on what you're doing right now. After all, that's the definition of concentration: *cittass'ek'aggata*: singleness of mind, singleness of heart. Singleness of mind in the sense that your focus is right here on one thing. You're with the breath, and the breath fills your awareness. That's another way in which it's single. Singleness of heart in that you try to do this as well as you can. You feel inspired by doing this. So, you're single-minded and you're single-hearted in giving yourself to the concentration, giving it your full attention.

Then you apply appropriate attention. Start asking the right questions. The Buddha defines appropriate attention in two different contexts. One is in terms of mundane right view, or the mundane level of categorical teachings, which is that skillful qualities should be developed, and unskillful qualities should be abandoned. The other level is defined in terms of the four noble truths and their duties. You try to comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, realize its cessation. You do that by developing the path.

So you bring to the mind questions framed in these terms as you're sitting here meditating. When the mind settles down, don't question it too quickly. But once you've really settled down and gotten a sense of being here solidly with the real sense of singleness, then you can ask yourself, "Is there still some disturbance here?" Here we're not talking about the disturbances outside. "What disturbances are coming from within the mind? What's causing this disturbance? Can I stop doing it?" As you ask those questions, you're on the right track.

Notice, we're thinking in terms of the four noble truths. Some people define right view as the three characteristics, but the Buddha never does that. The three characteristics, or the three perceptions, have their place within the four noble truths as you apply them to help comprehend suffering or abandon the cause. But the underlying framework you've always got to always keep in mind, the framework that actually gives meaning to these perceptions, is the four noble truths. On their own, the perceptions just say: Things are inconstant, stressful, not self. They don't say what you should do with them, or how you should react to those perceptions. It's the four noble truths that tell you what you're supposed to do with that insight.

The other day we were talking about emptiness, saying there were two kinds. There's the emptiness as a concentration perception, where you perceive the mind as being less and less disturbed, you appreciate the emptiness of disturbance, and you work in the direction of less and less disturbance. Then there's the second kind of emptiness, where you're seeing that the senses and their objects are empty of self.

The question sometimes comes up: Which is more basic? People tend to gravitate toward the second one, emptiness as an attribute of things, but I think the Buddha would have seen the issue the other way around. Because again, seeing that things are empty, what does that tell you? You could react in lots of ways. But with emptiness as empty of disturbance, it's basically telling you: Try to get the mind so there's less and less disturbances in there. One of the ways you do that is by not applying a sense of self to things. When you can see your sense of self as a disturbance, then you can let it go.

So, appropriate attention frames things in terms of right view, the four noble truths: telling you what questions to ask, what duties to perform. When you have that quality then you have the internal quality of which the Buddha said: Of all the internal qualities that are conducive to awakening and gaining the Dhamma Eye, there's nothing better.

As for the external qualities, he said admirable friendship is the number one quality. So, find friends that you admire. Listen to their Dhamma, and then take those lessons and internalize them. Meditate in the same way that you would listen thoroughly to a Dhamma talk, having respect for the voices in the

mind that are helping you, the Dhamma itself, your ability to practice these things. Give it your full attention and apply appropriate attention. Ask the right questions and carry out the right duties once you get answers to those questions.

That's how, through meditating, you can alight on the true Dhamma.