

## *The Dhamma Is in the Method*

*June 21, 2022*

It's the solstice. It's bright enough outside that the woodpeckers are still squawking. This is one of the two days of the year when the sun stands still. Night balances day. So try to get your mind still as well. Try to bring things into balance inside. Look at your mind. Look at your body. Look at your posture. Make sure your spine is straight, balanced, not leaning to the right, left, forward or back. Then make sure your mind isn't leaning. The Thai ajans use this image a lot. Leaning forward, of course, means leaning into thoughts of the future. Leaning back means leaning into thoughts of the past. Leaning left or right means leaning to things you like and don't like. Just try to be aware.

But the awareness itself is not enough. It's just the beginning. You want to be able to watch your mind thoroughly. You give it a task. Remember that basic principle for nourishing the Dhamma: You commit and then you reflect.

This is basically the method of the Dhamma. Just as science has a method, the Dhamma has a method, too. In the case of science, the scientific method is what ties everything together. The knowledge that we gain from that method tends to vary over time. People think they've proven something, and then another generation comes along and says, "No, that's not quite right." Things have to be adjusted or thrown out entirely. So the content changes, but the method stays the same. It's simply a matter of learning how to apply the method better and better, with more and more finesse, with more and more imagination.

One of the ironies of science is that many scientists believe in strict determinism. But if you really believed in strict determinism, there would be no way to conduct the scientific method. You couldn't criticize someone for having designed a poor experiment because he or she was determined to design it that way. And the designing of the experiment wouldn't have anything to do with how things came out anyhow. So, one of the assumptions of the scientific method is that you can make choices, and the things you choose to do will have different impacts on the world around you. In doing that, you'll learn things about the causal relationships among things. But the really important thing is the method.

It's the same with the practice. We can learn a lot of Dhamma through reading about it. We think we have lots of understanding about what the four noble truths mean and all the different wings to awakening. We may have the concepts down, but you don't really know them until you've applied the method. In other words, you try something out. Before you act, you ask

yourself, “What do you expect to be the results?” If you expect any harm, you don’t do it. If you don’t expect any harm, you can go ahead with it.

While you’re doing it, look to see if any harm is coming up. If there is, you stop. If there isn’t, you can continue. When you’re done, you reflect on the long term results. If you acted on that particular assumption, were the long-term results harmful or not? If they weren’t good, what can do to change? You’ve got to go back and look at those assumptions.

This is how we take our book knowledge of the Dhamma and the knowledge that we thought we gained from thinking things through, and we actually learn it in a new way as we try to develop good qualities in the mind.

So wherever you go, remember: Apply the method. There may be points of Dhamma you’re 100 percent sure you understand. But you’ve really got to test them as you put them into practice if you want to understand them fully.

The forest ajaans, again, make a lot of this. They say it’s like learning military science. You can draw diagrams on the blackboard, analyse old battles, see what lessons you can learn by looking at past battles from the outside. But then you have to go into battle yourself and you find it’s a very different experience as you see the battle from the inside. You’ve got to learn how to think on your feet, to test things. If they don’t work out, you’ve got to use your imagination, use your ingenuity, to come up with a new approach. Quickly. That’s when the Dhamma becomes yours. And you know it’s Dhamma because it gives good results.

This is why the teaching on kamma is such a basic part of the teaching, i.e. the principle that your actions will give results based on your intentions, in line with the principles of cause and effect. If your actions made no difference, or if you couldn’t choose your actions, then there would be no way that you could test any teaching. To believe that you can test a teaching by the results it gives when you put it into action means that you have to believe in the reality of action, in your ability to choose your actions, and in the principles of cause and effect.

Those principles follow a pattern, enough of a pattern that you can learn from them. That, too, is something you have to believe if you’re going to test any teaching. But you have to do things again and again and again so that the pattern becomes clear. This is why we meditate again and again, because the mind is pretty complex. Sometimes a method that works today won’t work tomorrow. The fact that it doesn’t work tomorrow doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s bad or that you weren’t observant today, simply that conditions tomorrow are different. Your mind is in different shape. Your body is in different shape. So you have to test things again in lots of different situations.

The Buddha gives some standards for judging how well the test goes. And again, you’re going to learn these standards first by hearing about them. But

then you're really going to come to appreciate them only as you try to apply them in practice. Those standards are in the list that he used to teach his stepmother about how to recognize what's Dhamma and what's not.

The two main standards have to do with the goal of the practice: We're trying to practice for dispassion and for being unfettered. Being unfettered means that the mind is released. And it's interesting that those two go together. You gain freedom through dispassion. That's looking for freedom in a place where we ordinarily might not think of looking.

But remember the Buddha's prescription for how you bring about dispassion and free the mind. You look at things as they arise, see what their origination is—what causes them. You look at them as they pass away as the cause ends. You have to see what their allure is, what their drawbacks are. When you can compare the allure and the drawbacks until you can see that the allure is false, or it's certainly not worth all the drawbacks, then you can let go through dispassion. That's the escape from those things.

Basically, you grow up. The word *dispassion* doesn't sound all that good. It sounds like you're dead. But that's not what the Buddha means. It's basically a question of maturing. It's like seeing a game you used to play that no longer holds any fascination. Like tic-tac-toe: As the child, when you haven't figured out what the best moves are, you can keep playing it again and again and again. But when you begin to see there's a pattern: If you start with certain X's or O's in certain boxes, you're sure to lose. When you see the patterns clearly, you lose your fascination with the game. There's no need to play it anymore.

That's dispassion. It basically sees that the mind's been playing a game with itself in going for the allure. But when you see that the drawbacks way outweigh the allure, you ask yourself, "Why continue paying that game? It's not worth the trouble." You've outgrown it.

So those are the standards we use to measure our practice in terms of the goal we want to accomplish.

Then we look at how our practice has an impact on others. The Buddha says you want to be modest. You don't want to show off whatever attainments you have. You don't go around bragging about your concentration. There's a nice story in the Canon of a novice, Ven. Anuruddha's novice. Anuruddha, you may remember, was the monk with the divine eye. He could, more than anyone else except the Buddha, see devas. He could see what's going on in all the different levels of the universe. He was also the one who, on the night of Buddha's passing away, was able to keep track of where the Buddha's mind was in the different levels of concentration before he entered total nibbana.

Anuruddha had a novice who could levitate up to the Himalayas, wash Anuruddha's bowl in the pure waters of the lake up there, and then levitate back. His main thought was how to do this without anybody seeing him.

That's the kind of attitude you want to have about your practice. You're not showing off. It's your secret treasure.

You also want to practice in such a way that you don't get entangled with others. You're looking for seclusion. Physical seclusion first, so that you can gain seclusion in your mind.

And you try to be unburdensome. You don't make big demands that this has to be that way, that has to be this way in any fashion that would place an undue burden on others.

So as you're practicing, if you notice that the way you practice is getting you entangled or making you burdensome, you've got to change. You realize okay, what you thought was the Dhamma is not the Dhamma. Or your interpretation of it was not right. You've got to go back and look at it again.

Then there are the qualities you develop inside: contentment, persistence, and what the Buddha calls shedding. Shedding refers to shedding pride, shedding thoughts of wanting to get revenge. There's another great story in the Canon of a young prince whose parents had been killed by a king. The prince decides to get revenge, so he applies for the job in the elephant stables of the king's palace. In the evening, he plays the flute to soothe the elephants. Well, the sound of the flute music goes from the elephant stables into the king's quarters. He likes the sound. So he has the young man brought in to play for him. That soothes him. So he tells the young man to stay as part of his own private retinue.

The young prince works to be trusted by the king, and finally gets the king in a position where he could, if he wanted to, kill him. But he decides not to. He's stopped by something his father had said before he died: "Don't look too far. Don't look too close. Animosity isn't ended by animosity. It's ended by non-animosity." In other words, the father was basically saying, "Don't try to get revenge." The prince at that crucial moment finally understood what his father's words meant.

Apparently in one of his previous lifetimes, the Buddha was the young prince. He told this story to the monks who were involved in a controversy over minor, minor things and he said, "Look, here are the noble warriors who live by the sword. They can still have forgiveness. They can still shed their thoughts of revenge. Why can't you as practitioners?"

Revenge may be too strong a word for the feelings you may have for others. But sometimes you just want to get back at somebody, with a conviction that you're right about something. But your rightness is creating a lot of trouble. There are ways of being right but being wrong at the same time. So, you want to learn how to shed those.

Then the pair of contentment and persistence: You're content with material things. If the food, clothing, shelter, and medicine you have is enough

to keep you alive, to keep you practicing, okay, then it's enough. But you're *not* content when unskillful attitudes come in and take over your mind. You don't just leave them there, saying, "Well, that's just the way it is. I've got to learn how to accept that. I shouldn't try to figure things out. I shouldn't try to pass judgment on these things. I should just learn how to accept them." That's stupidity.

These things that come rising up in the mind influence your actions. If you have any sense of compunction, you realize, as the Buddha says, that you've got to wipe them out of existence. Remember his statement that one of the secrets to his awakening was that he did not rest content even with skillful qualities. In other words, if they weren't skillful enough to take him all the way, he kept on looking for what was more skillful.

When he described his path of practice, he said he was in search of what was skillful. He left home in search of what was skillful. After he studied with the two ajaans and was disappointed in their teachings, he went out alone in search of what was skillful. When his austerities didn't work, he went in search of what was skillful. When he finally got the mind in right concentration, he wanted to know what was the skillful use of this concentration. So he used it to gain the three knowledges, and in each case, he asked himself, once he had gained that knowledge, "What's the skillful use of this knowledge?"

In terms of the first two knowledges, there were people who had attained those before him. There were people who had seen their previous lifetimes and then set themselves up as teachers. But the Buddha realized that that wasn't the skillful use of that knowledge. It had to be pursued further. Seeing that the way he had been reborn went up and down, up and down, up and down, the question was, "Why? How?"

He had a vision of all beings in the cosmos dying and being reborn in line with their actions. Again, there had been people before him who had gained similar knowledge and set themselves up as teachers. But the Buddha realized that that wasn't the skillful use of that knowledge. The skillful use would be to figure out: How do you end the suffering that comes from this endless round? He focused in on his own intentions, he focused in on his own views there in the present moment. That's how he was finally able to gain awakening.

So he didn't rest content. He kept searching: "Given that I have this, what's the skillful use of it? And if something was not skillful, how do you abandon it?" If your practice is that kind of practice, then it's practice going in the right direction. You're following the right method. Because how do you know what's skillful and what's not skillful? You look at the results. You put this principle into action, and what happens? You put that principle into action, what happens? Are the results satisfactory? It was his unwillingness to be satisfied easily—that's how he became the Buddha.

So these are the principles, the ways of measuring your actions as to whether they're really skillful or not, whether they're Dhamma or not. You want to keep these principles in mind, so that wherever you go, you've got the method to test things.

It's interesting that the Buddha taught these principles to his stepmother. As we see in the Canon, there were very few times when the Buddha himself went to teach the nuns. Occasionally his stepmother would come with a question. But otherwise, he would have the monks go teach the nuns on a regular basis. But early on, his stepmother came and asked for a short teaching that would help her in her practice. He gave her the principles so that she could learn how to depend on herself, to test what is and is not the Dhamma.

So, this is the method. This is how the Dhamma gets tested, and the test is what guarantees the Dhamma. Because, as I said, you can read the books, you can think things through, and it can all make sense, but if you don't actually put things into practice, you don't really know. And if you don't put them into practice, you don't understand the subtleties of some of the concepts.

We had an old man come and stay with us at Wat Dhammasathit for several years. When he was younger, he had been ordained as a monk, studied and passed the seventh grade of Pali exams, which is way up there. But then he disrobed, got a job with the government. When he retired, he came out to live at the monastery, and he was constantly contemplating the meaning of different Pali phrases. He still kept his interest in Pali going.

Ajaan Fuang made an interesting comment one time. He said that this man's understanding of the Dhamma was really coarse. Here was someone who passed all those exams, had lots of knowledge about the language, but that was it. It was just words. If you want subtle knowledge of the Dhamma, you've got to practice. And you've got to be very observant. Use your ingenuity. You've got to use your ingenuity so that when there are things you think you understand but when you put them into practice they don't work, you can figure out why.

You're not just here obeying instructions. You've got to put some of yourself into this. Just like scientists—they have to put some of themselves into designing their experiments right, by using their ingenuity to figure out how they're going to detect a certain relationship. The more you put into testing the Dhamma, the more you're going to get out.