

Adult Dhamma

September 28, 2006

The Buddha treated his students like adults. If he had wanted to, he could have told them about all the amazing and wonderful things that he had learned during his awakening, and that they should simply obey him without question. But instead, he taught them how to question, how to think for themselves, how to gain awakening themselves. Even when he was teaching children he taught them adult things, or basically how to become adults.

The Novice's Questions, for instance, start out with the big harsh fact of life: that all beings subsist on food. This fact is also the main proof against the idea of intelligent design. If there were intelligent design, we could all live off the dew every morning, the rain every evening. We wouldn't have to harm anyone else in keeping our bodies going. But this is a fact of life: We have a body that need to be fed; we have to eat. When we eat, there's suffering, even if we're very strict vegetarians. The farmers who have to clear the fields and plant the food, the animals who die when the fields are cleared, the people who have to transport the food once it's grown: A lot of work and misery goes into that. So when the Buddha introduced the topic of causality to children, he started with a harsh fact of life. This is your prime experience of causality: Feeding goes on all the time. Without it, life couldn't last.

When he taught his young son, Rahula, about truthfulness, the teaching was also pretty harsh. If you feel no shame in telling a lie, he said, your goodness is empty. It's thrown away. You can't be trusted. Then he taught Rahula to apply truthfulness in looking at his actions, to learn from his actions. That is basically what it means to become an adult. When you do something, you notice what actually happens as a result, and then you learn from it. If your action harmed yourself or others, you resolve not to repeat that mistake. Then you remember to apply that lesson to your next action, and then the next. That's what mindfulness is for: to remember these lessons. As the Buddha says, this is how you purify your thoughts, words, and deeds. Nobody else is going to come along and do the job for you. You've got to do it yourself. You have to learn how to be observant. You have to learn how to deal maturely with your mistakes. Don't hide them from yourself. Don't pretend they didn't happen. Be adult enough to willingly tell your mistakes to other people. That is what it means to be an adult: You take responsibility.

When he taught Rahula meditation, he started off with the images of making the mind like earth, making the mind like water, like fire, like wind. In other words, earth doesn't react to what it dislikes. If you throw something disgusting on the earth, the earth doesn't shrink away. The same with fire: It can burn disgusting things and doesn't recoil in disgust. The same with water, the same with wind: They wash things away, they blow things away, and it doesn't matter whether those things are disgusting or not. They don't react.

That was the Buddha's preliminary instruction to Rahula on the kind of mind you have to bring to meditation. You don't go by your likes or dislikes. You don't shrink away from pain. Yet this doesn't mean you become indifferent,

because the next step is to work with the breath, which requires that you train the mind in a certain direction. You train yourself to breathe constantly aware of the whole body, to breathe calming the breath—which means that you are sensitive to pleasure or pain, and you’re working to ever more subtle levels of pleasure. But in order to learn how to do this skillfully, you have to put your immediate reactions aside, and look to see what actually works.

All of these are instructions on how to become an adult, how to deal with complexities, because cause and effect is a very complex issue.

Look at dependent co-arising. It requires an adult mind to handle that kind of complexity. And yet the Buddha gives basic instructions to children on how to handle it—how to approach it, how to be an adult in your meditation, how to take responsibility for yourself—looking at things in terms of what you do and the pleasure and the pain that result. Once you’ve got those basic principles down, then it’s simply a matter of learning to be more and more observant as to what works in getting the mind to settle down, what works in giving rise to insight. He gives you help. Look at the Canon: forty-five volumes. And a very large portion of it appears to have come from the Buddha himself. That’s a lot of advice, but it all keeps pointing you back to yourself. As the Buddha keeps saying, Buddhas only point the way. It’s up to you to follow the path. This means you have to be responsible.

You have to be clear about your intentions, mature about admitting when you have some unskillful intentions in the mind, and honest about the results that come when you act on unskillful intentions. Only by observing that, again and again, can you finally get tired of those intentions. When you really see that there’s a connection between unskillful intentions and needless suffering, you become genuinely motivated to find the escape from that suffering. This is the only way you can do it. Basically, you have to learn to judge what’s worth observing and what’s not. And again the Buddha points you to what’s worth observing. The issue of needless stress that comes from unskillful states of mind: That’s where he points you – “Look here, look here, look here.” Then it’s up to you to see and—when you’ve seen—to take that knowledge and put it to use. This requires that you be responsible.

So it’s a pretty radical, a very demanding teaching. The question is, “Do you want to be an adult or not?” There are lots of people out there who’d rather not be adults, who’d rather be infantilized. And there are lots of other people who enjoy telling them what to do, what to think. Even in Buddhist circles, you find various kinds of meditation where as they say, “Everything has all been thought out, everything has all been worked out, just follow the instructions. Don’t think, don’t add anything of your own.” It’s interesting to note that a lot of these methods also refer to the teaching on not-self as egolessness. Any sense of pride, any sense of independence is a bad thing in those meditation traditions. As one tradition would say, just be totally passive and aware, very equanimous, and just let your old sankharas burn away. And above all, don’t think. Or if you are going to think, they say, learn how to think the way we think. And they have huge volumes of philosophy you have to learn, to squeeze your mind into their mold, after which they promise you awakening.

But that doesn’t work. Awakening comes from being very observant in seeing things you don’t expect to see, developing your own sensitivities, your own discernment. After all, as the Buddha said, the issue is the suffering you’re

creating. If you don't have the basic honesty and maturity to see that, you're never going to gain awakening no matter how much you know, no matter how much you study, no matter how equanimous you are. You've got to take responsibility. And you've got to be willing to learn from your mistakes. When the Buddha taught Rahula, he didn't say, "Don't ever make mistakes." He said, "Try not to make mistakes, but if you do make a mistake—and it's expected that you will—this is how you handle it, this is how you learn from it." That's teaching Rahula how to be an adult.

So it's up to each of us: Do we want to be adults? Or do we want to continue to be treated like children?—told what to do, told what to think, not being willing to take any risks. It may sound safe and reassuring, but if you don't take risks, you never get awakened. And the safety of being a child is all very delusional. It's the delusional safety of wanting to be told that everything you need to do has already been thought out. Or that there are lots of different ways to the goal, so it doesn't matter which one you choose; you can choose whichever one you like and you can be guaranteed that all the paths will lead to the same place. Again, that kind of thinking puts your likes and wishes ahead of everything else. That's precisely what an adult can't do. As an adult you have to realize that there are risks in this meditation path. There are some paths that do lead to the goal, they do lead to the end of suffering. Other paths lead to all kinds of other places. You have to be responsible for which path you choose, which one looks to be the most honest. This of course throws you back on your own honesty as well.

Sometimes you read about teachers who turn out to be major disappointments. They do really horrible things to their students, and the students complain that they've been victimized. But in nearly every case, when you read the whole story, you realize that the students should have seen this coming. There were blatant warning signals that they chose to ignore. You have to be responsible in choosing your teachers, choosing your path. Once you've chosen the path that looks likely, you have to be responsible in following it, in learning how to develop your own sensitivity in following it. Because after all, what is the path that the Buddha points out? There's virtue, there's concentration, and there's discernment. These are all qualities in your own mind. We all have them to some extent. Learning how to develop what's in your own mind is what's going to make all the difference. The Buddha's discernment isn't going to give you awakening; his virtue and concentration aren't going to give you awakening. You have to develop your own. Nobody else can develop these things for you. Other people can give you hints; they can help point you in the right direction. But the actual work and the actual seeing is something you have to do for yourself.

So the question is: Are you mature enough to want this path? Are you mature enough to follow it through? Nobody's forcing you. Just realize the dangers of *not* following this path and make your choice.