

Giving & Taking Time

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This is a practice that requires endurance. To see what's going on in the mind, you have to watch it over long periods of time. And you have to give up a lot of your other interests to focus on this. Ours is a society that likes to have its cake and eat it too—and get a few extra pieces on the side. But the practice, the training of the mind, requires that you have a clear sense of priorities and realize that there are a lot of pleasures that you're going to have to give up in order to find a happiness that's really true.

So you have to learn to endure that fact—and learn how to be comfortable without a lot of the things that you normally take for granted. This requires that you develop a lot of the right attitudes as you practice.

One is to remember that this is a practice that does begin with giving. You have to give of your energy, give of your time. And if you learn how to do it voluntarily, it's a lot easier than if you have to have it pulled out of you. This is why the ajaans in Thailand give so many pep talks when they're giving Dhamma talks. As you feel up to it, you feel energized by the talk and ready to give more. But sometimes you have to draw on your own resources. So you've got to develop that right attitude that we're not here to “get” something without first putting something in.

The second attitude you need is that when you're sticking with something over a long period of time, it's a lot easier if you focus on the positive than on the negative. It's a really basic principle but one that we so often overlook.

Sometimes we get discouraged: The practice isn't going as fast as we'd like it to. Or we get discouraged by the number of responsibilities and other obligations we have that seem to be holding us back. We wonder: When are we going to get past them? You have to remind yourself that at the very least you've got a path here that does offer hope of a true happiness. There are so many people living out there who don't have that hope. And not just ordinary everyday people.

I've been doing a bit of reading on Post-Modernism recently, and according to them there's no hope: You're always going to be trapped in somebody's structure of meaning, somebody's discourse. You drop one and you get trapped in another. You drop that one you get trapped in another one. That attitude offers no hope for freedom at all.

So here, at the very least, you're on a path that does have a light at the end of the tunnel. And fortunately that's not the only place where the light is. There are little LED lamps in the niches of the tunnel all the way along. This is why Ajaan Lee's teachings on how to find a sense of well-being with the breath are so pertinent. They give you the energy you need. And it's not just the sense of well-being. The other aspect is to learn how to ask questions, be curious. Take

an interest in what's going on right now.

If you focus too much on how far away the end of the path is, you tend to slough over the things that you're doing right now, saying right now, thinking right now, that really need work.

And to work on them you have to be curious: Why do you think in these ways? Why do you have these attitudes? If you just take your mood for granted and let it govern you, you're never going to learn anything; you're never going to be free of it. So when you find yourself in a bad mood, get curious about it: "Why is this bad mood overtaking me? What attitudes do I have that are making me miserable right now?" This is not to say that there may not be some negative things happening from outside. But remember the things that are *really* causing you to suffer are the things that are coming from within.

So you want to keep reflecting back on that—when you're grumpy, when you're tired, when you're discouraged. Pull out of the attitude a bit and ask yourself, "Why did I let this take over?" Sometimes it may be a lack of physical energy; sometimes it may be some deep-seated attitude you may have about feeling oppressed, feeling put upon. And you can ask yourself: Do you want that attitude to take over your life and continue having power over your life? If you don't, what are you going to do? You have to learn how to understand it to figure it out.

You've probably noticed that if you're facing a problem when you're really up to look into the problem and trying to figure it out, time can pass very quickly as you're figuring it out. And so you're not oppressed by how long things are taking, because you're actually making good use of your time.

So it's not the slowness of the path that's actually getting you down, that makes time seem to drag. It's the fact that you're not making good use of the time.

These are some of the ways in which you can learn how to stick with something, develop your powers of endurance and persistence—your stick-to-it-iveness. Unfortunately in our society these character traits are not encouraged that much. "Click here, click here," and automatically you'll get instant gratification. And we start taking that for granted.

A couple of years back I got a new computer and at first I was really impressed by how fast it was. Then a couple of months later I had to go back and use the old computer and I felt really dragged down by how slow the old one was, forgetting that when I was using the older one regularly, it seemed fast enough.

This is what happens to our society: Things get faster and we expect instant gratification—and the instant gets shorter and shorter. But you've got to remind yourself: The things you gain instantly like that don't stick with you very long. It's like eating potato chips: You get one and you can't just stop with one; you want another and another and another. And they don't really give any satisfaction. If you want something that provides real satisfaction for the mind, you've got to be willing to give time.

Think about that: "give time." You have to give it. You have to give your energy: Use it wisely, use it skillfully, develop the right attitude toward figuring out: What is this problem

right here? If you learn how to keep looking back at your own mind, you realize: “The problem is coming from the way I’m thinking. Okay, what is it?” And if you can’t figure it out, just sit and watch for a while, knowing that if you pose the right question, you’ll see things that you didn’t see before.

It’s like going into a forest: If you’ve never seen certain kinds of mushrooms before, you can walk past a huge patch of them and not even notice them because you don’t know what to look for. But once you learn the tell-tale signs, you see that they’re all over the place.

So try to keep this attitude of interest. It’s a giving of energy, a giving of interest. That makes all the difference. That allows you to stick with this practice through all the ups and downs and ins and outs. And if you take an interest in the proper spot, you find that the time actually goes by very quickly. So don’t keep on thinking about how long this is taking. The question is: What can you do right now? What can you give right now? What can you learn right now?

You’re on a good path. Don’t let your sense of entitlement or your desire for instant gratification pull you off.