

Breaking Old Habits

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July 4, 2003

Independence Day. A good time to ask yourself what you'd like to be independent from. What are the things that weigh down on the mind, that oppress the mind? If you ask most people, they'll talk about things outside: their job, their family, their worries about the economy or the environment. But if you look deeply in your own mind, you'll realize that the main burdens on the mind are the things that come from within. This is why the mind needs to be trained. If the mind isn't trained, it just keeps on creating suffering for itself without realizing what it's doing.

The phrase we chanted just now—"Those who don't discern suffering"—on the surface sounds very strange, for everybody knows suffering. We've all suffered in one way or another in our lives. But the issue is: Do we really discern suffering? Do we really understand it? Do we see precisely what's happening? If we could look into the way the mind is creating suffering for itself, to the point where we really understand it and take it apart, then that's the end of it. That's what comprehension means. As the Buddha once said, our duty with regard to suffering is to comprehend it, to understand it to the point where you stop creating it, where you can let it go. All the causes, all the conditions that lead to it: you can let them go. That way the problems you're responsible for totally disband. As for the rest of the world outside, it goes along with its own way, but it doesn't make inroads on the mind, can't weigh the mind down. Those are the good benefits of learning to understand or learning to discern suffering.

But for most of us, our lives are distracted with other things, other issues that seem to be more pressing—and they make themselves more pressing. They demand that we take responsibility for them. It requires a real act of will to step outside of those requirements, those responsibilities, and to take the time to really look into the mind to see exactly where the suffering is, what the suffering is, where it's coming from, and how it can be stopped.

The Buddha once said all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering—in other words, how to understand it to the point where you put an end to it. That's the essence of the teaching. Once that was accomplished, he said, that's all you really need to be taught. From that point on you're truly independent.

In the texts they describe stages in understanding suffering, stages of awakening. Total freedom is called arahantship. To become an arahant means you become someone worthy, someone worthy of respect. The first stage on the

way is called stream-entry. You enter the stream to nirvana, the stream to true peace. The meaning of the image is that once you reach that point it's inevitable, just like getting into a river. The current will carry you down to the ocean — nirvana — for sure.

So it's important to reflect on the conditions that the Buddha said lead to that first stage of insight. The first of these conditions is having good friends, people who have discerned suffering, have come to an understanding of it. Not only do they have that understanding, but they also lead their lives in line with the fact that they really have understood. This is an important condition for the practice because you find that the people you hang around are the ones who shape your own behavior, your own attitudes. Even if you are simply reacting against them, the way they think has a molding effect on your own thoughts, so you have to be careful who you hang around with. This is what you might call the social side of the practice.

The second condition is that you listen to the Dhamma from those people. You really listen. And the Buddha gives instructions on how to know what's Dhamma and what's not, the litmus test being to put what you've heard into practice. But before you get to that point, you first have to think about it. You have to ask questions.

This is what's radical about the Buddha's teaching, the emphasis placed on asking questions, on framing the right questions. He calls this ability "appropriate attention," paying attention to the right issues — in other words, the issues related to the end of suffering and precisely what your mind is doing to create suffering. This factor — appropriate attention — is the third condition for stream-entry. Our ordinary tendency is to blame our suffering on this person or that person, not liking what this person is doing, not liking what that person is doing, getting upset, getting offended, and running off in that direction without looking at what the mind itself is doing. So the first question is to look inside. If you put a particular teaching into practice, what results do you get? Do you find more passion, more aversion in your life, or less? Do you find that you're more burdensome to yourself and other people, or less? As you work through these questions and test the Dhamma that you've listened to, you get a better and better sense of how to practice in the Dhamma in line with what the Dhamma really is, the Dhamma here being the truth, the truth that leads to the end of suffering. This is the fourth condition for stream-entry.

So those are the four conditions: associating with good people, listening to the Dhamma, appropriate attention, and practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. It sounds like a one, two, three, four process, but it's not really. All four factors influence one another. As you put the Dhamma into practice that's

both a test of the Dhamma you've heard and also a test of the people you've been listening to, to see if they really are the good people you thought they were.

So these things are all connected. And all four factors help refine one another as you practice. And as the Buddha once said, of the external factors the most important one is associating with good people. Of the internal factors, the most important is the factor of appropriate attention, learning to ask yourself the right questions: questioning your attitudes, questioning the results you're getting from your actions. Even though we may be sitting here with our eyes closed, we don't blind ourselves, we don't close our eyes to what's going on in our lives. We close our eyes so we can look more carefully, look more fully into the mind.

So ask yourself directly: What are you doing right now? What are the results of what you're doing? Are they satisfactory? So many people go through life habitually, on automatic pilot. They develop a habit and then stick with that habit, becoming more and more ingrained in certain ways of doing things. This is basically the definition of addiction: people trying to put an end to the suffering they feel, not really quite getting there, but continuing to repeat the same old actions over and over and over again. And the habits have an old familiarity. It's like an old shoe you feel comfortable wearing. It may not be a particularly good shoe, or particularly good for your posture, but you're comfortable with it because it's familiar. What we're doing when we're practicing is learning how to ask the kind of questions that break out of the old familiar mold, break out of the old familiar habits, break our old addictions — our ways of doing things that really haven't gotten the ideal results, but where we've learned to settle for second best, sometimes not even second best: third or fourth.

Each time you sit down to meditate, remind yourself: What are you here for? You want real happiness. Have you found it? Well, no. If not, then what can you do to change what you're doing? Develop the ability to keep asking that question and to be trying new things. That's what appropriate attention is all about. That way you can really find what it means to practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. That was one of Ajaan Mun's most frequent topics in his Dhamma talks. He said that we should practice the Dhamma not in line with our preconceived notions, not in line with whatever our cultural background may be, or our sense that, "Well I'm the sort of person who does these things this way so it's going to have to be this way." We learn to drop those attitudes in order to find out what the actual Dhamma is, what the practice of the true Dhamma is. And then you bring your own actions, your own thoughts, your own words, your deeds, your own attitudes in line with that.

This requires a fair amount of sacrifice, a fair amount of letting go. So many old ways we have of doing things we've got to learn how to put aside. We often resist this, but when we're willing to put them aside we find that things open up

in the mind. If it weren't possible to change, there would be no reason to teach the Dhamma. The Buddha wouldn't have had to waste his time. But he saw that it *can* make a difference, that people *can* change their ways of living, ways of thinking, ways of acting and speaking for the better when they learn how to ask the right questions. And particularly when they look at the issue of suffering in terms of cause and effect. Exactly what goes along with the suffering? The texts use the word *samudaya*, which means origination, but it also means something that arises together. Every time there's suffering, what else arises at the same time in the mind? When the suffering goes away, what's gone? When it's come back again, what else has come back with it? You want to learn how to look into these questions, and that requires good, strong concentration, and steady mindfulness, which is why we work on these qualities in the meditation.

This kind of questioning also requires a sense of wellbeing in the present moment so that you're not asking out of desperation, you're not either grasping at straws or pushing things away out of irritation, for understanding doesn't come that way. Understanding comes from looking at things consistently, steadily, and asking those questions in terms of cause and effect, being more sensitive to what we're doing, and more sensitive to the results. And when these factors finally come together—the stillness, the questioning, the sensitivity—they take all the things we've been doing to create suffering, to make ourselves dependent on suffering, to tie ourselves down, and they unravel them. And when we no longer tie ourselves down, no one else can come to tie us back up, for our freedom, our independence, wasn't theirs to give in the first place. It's something that each of us can find for ourselves.