

Long-Term Welfare

October 27, 2003

The Buddha once said that the quest for wisdom, the quest for discernment, starts with a question: “What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” This may sound strange, because we’re used to hearing the Buddha’s take on discernment or insight as dealing with inconstancy, stress, and not-self, which sounds like the very opposite of happiness. But it’s not. It’s part of that quest. Look at that question: “What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” It starts with the realization that happiness is something you have to do, or something you have to bring about. It doesn’t come floating in on its own. What seems to come floating in on its own is the happiness that comes from past actions. But that kind of happiness just comes and goes, comes and goes. There’s nothing really reliable about it. But when you realize that there *is* something that you can do, you can make a difference with your actions right now, that’s where discernment begins.

The next part of discernment is looking for long-term happiness, a happiness that’s worth the effort you put into it. If you put a lot of effort into happiness and get only a slight taste and then it goes, it’s not really worth it. So you look for the kind of happiness that lasts.

This is what the path is all about. We develop generosity, we develop virtue, and we meditate as ways of bringing about long-term happiness. The happiness that comes from giving lasts a lot longer than the happiness that comes from taking. It goes deeper. The same holds true for the happiness that comes from holding to your principles. If you gain the kind of happiness that comes from breaking your principles, you pay a big price. It’s not worth it.

But even with the happiness that comes from generosity and virtue, if you haven’t developed the qualities of mind that teach you how to deal properly with happiness, it can turn into a cause for suffering. This is why we meditate, to give the mind a deeper basis for its happiness. Look at the four noble truths. They start with the fact that there is suffering in life, and it lies in clinging. Sometimes the truths seem to be about nothing but suffering, but the third noble truth is the end of suffering. The fourth noble truth is the path to the end of the suffering. Part of that path, right concentration, includes pleasure and rapture: the pleasure and rapture that come from having the mind absorbed in a single object. This is the kind of pleasure, this is the kind of well-being or happiness, that forms the path, something we work on.

Once the mind gets settled in with that sense of well-being, then you can turn to look at the other things you ordinarily chase after for the sake of your happiness. You begin to see that they're awfully fleeting, and they're really not worth the effort.

This is where the contemplation of the three characteristics comes in, thinking about things that are inconstant, stressful, and not self. As we were saying this afternoon, if you do this contemplation without a good, solid basis in concentration, it gets threatening, very depressing. It all becomes very negative. But if you're coming from the point of view based on the strength of concentration, with a strong sense of well-being, you can look at these other things you used to chase after, and you realize that you don't really want to anymore. They're not worth it. You find it a lot easier to let them go.

So the contemplation of the three characteristics is designed to refine your happiness, to help you to stay more and more consistently with the happiness that's solid, secure.

So, as you're developing concentration, don't worry about being attached to it. It's an important attachment. If you don't have this to hold on to, it's difficult to let go of other things.

A group of people once came to see Ajaan Fuang. They had been studying the Abhidhamma, and they heard he was a very good teacher, so they wanted to find out what he taught. He told them, "I teach breath meditation." Immediately, they refused. They didn't want to study with him. He asked why. They said they were afraid that if they focused on the breath, they would get stuck on jhana, and when they died they would be born as Brahmas, and wouldn't make it to nibbana. He took one look at them and, I think, he realized there was no way they were going to get to nibbana the way they were practicing. I don't know about studying Abhidhamma here in the States, but in Thailand, Abhidhamma students are usually a very argumentative group of people, very opinionated, spending a lot of time analyzing each other's faults. That kind of person doesn't get even to the Brahma worlds, much less to nibbana. So he said: "What's wrong with going to the Brahma worlds? Even non-returners go to the Brahma worlds. In any event, being reborn as a Brahma is better than being reborn as a dog."

That's what happens to people when they stick with just the negative side of insight. It all becomes very critical, very nitpicky. Then they start focusing on one another's faults, and who knows, they could very easily be reborn as dogs.

You need to have a sense of well-being to hold on to before you can let go of other attachments. Otherwise, when you let go of, say, your attachment to sensual pleasures, you start holding on to your attachment to your views, and that can be

very strong and very tenacious. Yet, those are things we have to learn how to let go of as well. We learn how to use our views, but we don't use them to hit one another over the head.

The only way to let go of, say, your attachments to sights, smells, sounds, tastes, and tactile sensations is to give the mind a good sense of well-being just by breathing, so that when you let go, you're not letting go with a sense of loss. You're letting go with a sense that you already have enough. You've got something better. You don't need those things anymore.

It's like growing up. You look at the things that used to give you pleasure as a child and you realize that they no longer have any substance. What you do as you practice is that you learn how to outgrow your attachments by giving yourself better and better things to hold on to.

This is why we have the teachings on the five aggregates, the three characteristics. You look at whatever pleasure you've been depending on, and you take it apart, to see what it's made of. The more carefully you look at it, the more you realize there's really nothing there in the building blocks for this big edifice of whatever happiness you've been able to find.

The Buddha compares them to foam floating down the river, or bubbles that appear on the river when the rain falls. They come and they go. They come and they go, like a mirage. They're like a magic trick. The more carefully you look at them, the less is there. They're very insubstantial. They seem substantial because of the build-up we give to them, the labels we paste on them, the anticipation we have that this pleasure is going to be really good, this pleasure is going to be really satisfying. You put a lot of effort into it, and you hold on to that expectation. Then when the actual pleasure comes, it's not nearly as satisfying as you thought it might be, but then you hold on to the idea that it was, just to convince yourself that it was all worth it. You've invested so much. You don't want to see your investment vanish away like that.

So there's a basic dishonesty in the mind in the way we normally look for pleasure, the way we normally look for happiness. What we're trying to do as we analyze things into the five khandhas and look at the characteristics of those five aggregates to see how inconstant they are, how stressful they are, how they're not really you or yours, is to teach ourselves how to be more honest with ourselves about what we're doing and the results of what we've done. Again, we do this because we also learn how to look for pleasure in better ways, more lasting ways.

Ultimately, we get to the point where we can let go of the other attachments, and the only attachment you've left is the attachment to concentration and discernment. If you look at them carefully, then you begin to see that they, too,

are made up of the same aggregates, only they're subtler, but they're made of the same building blocks. That's when you learn how to let go of your attachment to the path as well.

But in the meantime, don't be in a great hurry to overcome your attachment to concentration. Many people practice concentration once or twice—"Ah yes, concentration is inconstant, stressful, and not self, it doesn't last"—and think they've gone beyond it. That's short-circuiting the practice. It's like being given a ladder to take you up to true happiness, and you chop the ladder up into pieces. It's self-defeating.

So, as you're focusing on your concentration, don't be afraid of being attached to it. It's supposed to be good; it's supposed to be attractive. In fact, you want to spend a lot of time tailoring your concentration so that it does really feel good for you. The Buddha talks about using concentration to gladden the mind, to steady the mind, to release the mind. You do that in the course of learning how to use the concentration, so that it really feels good for whatever ails you.

For example, if you're feeling tired, there are certain ways of concentrating that give you more energy. If you're feeling stressed out, there are other ways of focusing on the breath, adjusting the breath, so that it's more relaxing. When things feel dry and disappointing in life, there are certain ways of focusing on the breath so that it's really fulfilling. It feels really, really good deep down inside. Learning how to adjust your concentration enables you to balance out whatever is wrong, either in the body or the mind. That's the skill that you need to develop in concentration.

A lot of people think there's one state of concentration or one way of experiencing, say, each of the levels of jhana, but that's not the case. Depending on what state the body is in, what state the mind is in, you're going to need different types of concentration, different ways of playing with the concentration in order to make it really gratifying, to release you from whatever sense of discomfort or disease you have, and to steady the mind in different situations. That's the skill of concentration. It's something we want to work on to really familiarize ourselves with what this state of mind can do, so that we find it's more and more something we can rely on.

As our concentration gets better, we're less and less attached to having our external world in a particular way.

When you start out, you need things to be quiet, you like certain circumstances in terms of the people around you, the society in which you're living, because your concentration is still one-dimensional. But as you make it more multi-dimensional, you find that you can practice it in any situation. In fact,

this is one of the reasons why the forest monks go out into the forest, to test themselves in different situations. Can they keep the mind under control in places of physical hardship, in places of danger?

Ajaan Fuang tells about how he once went to visit Ajaan Lee, who at that time was teaching in Bangkok. Ajaan Fuang had been out in the forest, and his mind was doing very well in the forest. He came into see Ajaan Lee. He said one night in Bangkok, in the monastery where Ajaan Lee was staying was right next to a railroad track, had destroyed his meditation. He realized that there was more that he had to learn. So he worked on meditating in less than ideal circumstances, and found that that forced him to become more and more skillful in how he approached concentration, how he approached his breath.

So, simply getting the mind into concentration is not enough. You want to learn how to really use it, how to adjust it, how to master the concentration, so that it's good for whatever situation you're in. It can provide you a refuge wherever you are.

Only then, after you really learn how to depend on it, will you want to look at what's even better. There comes a point where even the stillness of concentration is not enough. You want something even more still, less burdensome than that. That's when you start taking it apart. But until then, work on putting it together in every situation. Even after people have gained awakening, they still have their concentration. It's not that they abandon it forever, it's just that they use it just as a dwelling place for the mind, as a resting spot for the mind. It's a skill they've mastered, and so they know when to use it, know when to put it aside.

So don't be in too great of a hurry to get past the concentration. It's there to help you, both to give you a sense of well-being in the present moment and to form the basis for insight, for insight that's solid, so that when you let go, you let go out of a sense of simple dispassion—not aversion, but dispassion, two very different things.

So no matter how much work that concentration may involve, it's all worth it

Don't think that it's a case of working on nothing but concentration, and then working on nothing but insight. The insight goes together with the concentration, as you get more and more refined in your sense of what true pleasure it, what true well-being is, and what you can do to attain long-term well-being. That one question carries you all the way through: "What when I do it will be for my long term welfare and happiness?" It's the beginning and it's the guide for insight all the way through.