

To Purify the Heart

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One of Ajaan Fuang's teachings that most struck home with me was his statement one night that the purpose of the practice is to purify the heart. All the other things, he said—all the psychic powers and other things that can attract people to the practice— are just games. The real purpose is the purity of the heart.

So how do you purify the heart? As the Buddha told his son, you look at your actions as a mirror for your heart, like we're doing right now with the breath. The breath is like a mirror for the mind. The way we breathe, the way we relate to the breath energy in the body, tells us a lot about the state of the mind right now. It's possible to sit down and, within a few minutes, give yourself a headache, a backache, or get things all messed up inside. Or it's possible to find areas of pleasure that you can develop, potentials that you can develop, to give rise to a state of ease and well-being.

A lot of it depends on how observant you are. That was another one of Ajaan Fuang's most frequent teachings, which is that whatever happens in your meditation, you have to be observant, to watch what you're doing, to watch the results. When something comes up in the mind that seems interesting, you have to immediately watch what the mind does in response. Sometimes something very attractive or impressive can come up in your meditation, and immediately you latch onto it and that spoils it. You're not paying attention to the fact of how you're reacting to things, and so you can miss a lot of things that way.

Which is why, when the Buddha taught Rahula, he taught him to look at his actions throughout the day, his speech throughout the day, his thoughts throughout the day. You want to watch yourself not only while you're meditating, but also as you go through the day, to see what you're doing, see what you're saying, to see what you're thinking, and to see the impact these things have, both on you and other on people. Because the quality of purity goes along with two other qualities: wisdom and compassion.

Wisdom is realizing that true happiness is going to have to come from your own efforts, and, for true happiness to be true, it has to be long-term. To be long-term, it can't harm anyone else. This is how wisdom connects with compassion. You want a happiness that doesn't harm you, doesn't harm others. So you have to keep their well-being in mind. And the quality of purity comes when you look at your actions, your words, and your thoughts to see how they fit in with these

principles that you've set up as your goal: the principle of a true happiness, a harmless happiness.

And you have to be very thorough. This is one of the reasons why the teaching is not just something that's contained in words or can be put in books. The Buddha set up a monastic order so that people could live closely with their teachers to see how these principles are employed in day-to-day life—and for the teachers to have the ability to see what the student is doing, to see when the student is missing the implications. Because it's easy to get an idea of the general principles and then to go off and totally be ignorant of how those principles apply, especially in your day-to-day dealings with the people around you.

So the Dhamma is not just words. In fact, the words that a Dhamma talk say are not the Dhamma themselves. They point to the Dhamma. *Dhammadesana*, the pointing to the Dhamma: That's one of the terms for a Dhamma talk. The actual Dhamma is something that arises in your mind. It's a quality of the heart composed of wisdom, compassion, and this effort to be pure in your actions, i.e., to make sure that your actions really do fall in line with your principles.

Now, because the breath is so intimately related to any kind of action you may do, this is a good place to stay, to watch the mind, your actions, your words, everything you're doing. You want to watch them thoroughly. And the breath is a good place to stay to see this. Without the breath, you couldn't move your mouth, you couldn't move your body. It would be possible for the mind to think without the breath, but it'd be a disembodied consciousness. It wouldn't have an impact on the world outside. It's through the breath that you relate to the world around you. First you use it to relate to the other properties of the body and then, through them, you also relate to other people. It's because of the breath energy in the eye that you see other people. You hear other people because of the breath energy in the ear.

So staying with the breath is a good place to watch all of this, and to learn to be very observant. If you see that you're doing something unskillful, try to develop a healthy sense of shame, i.e., realizing that that was something that didn't go in line with your principles, and that it was a mistake you don't want to repeat.

Again, this is why we have teachers, so that you can go and talk to them about the mistake. But the teachers don't want to do all the work for you. In fact, that was one of Ajaan Fuang's main ways of instruction. If there was something he saw that you were really confused about, he would straighten you out. But there are other times when he would throw it back to you, and you'd have to observe for yourself.

Like the way you're breathing right now, the way you're relating to the breath energy right now: Nobody can get into your head, nobody else can get into your body and straighten things out for you. This is the way it's been with everybody all along. You have to learn how to relate to your own breath and figure out what you're doing that's wrong.

Then use your ingenuity. If something's not working, try something new. This ability to come up with new approaches and then be willing to test them: That's how you develop skill inside with regard to how you relate to your own breath, how you relate to the energies and other potentials in the body right now. This is something each of us has to discover for him or herself.

That's why Ajaan Fuang said that, as a meditator, you have to think like a thief. In other words, you can't expect the teacher to explain everything to you and give you all the solutions. You have to look around yourself and catch the signs, just like a thief planning to rob somebody's house. You can't go up to the front door and knock on it and say, "Hey, when are you going to be away? And, by the way, where do you keep your valuables?" You've got to watch, case the joint, hide out behind the bushes until you notice their patterns. That's when you know you can slip into the house, and you get an idea of what's valuable in the house, and where it's kept—by being observant.

So always keep this point in mind, that ultimately you have to be your own teacher, you have to come up with ideas when you find yourself face to face with a problem and you've tried all the solutions you've read in the books, and they don't seem to work. Well, you go back and think about how you might tweak them. Because all the basic principles are there. It's simply the question of which principle applies to your situation right now.

There's that story I tell about the cornerstone in the ordination hall in Wat Asokaram. Ajaan Fuang told that to me one time to explain the attitude of proper respect for your teacher. When they first laid the foundation for the ordination hall, they were anticipating that the Buddha image would be on the west side of the hall, facing east, as it is in almost every ordination hall in Thailand, because the Buddha was supposed to be facing east on the night of his awakening. So they placed the cornerstone with all the relics, Buddha images, passages of Dhamma, and other sacred objects, under the spot where they thought the Buddha image would be.

Then, as the building was under construction, Ajaan Lee changed his mind and decided to put the image in the east side, facing west. Apparently, that was his way of forecasting that Buddhism was going to move West. But when the hall was done, they realized that the cornerstone was now under a section of the hall that

people were going to be stepping over. And as you know, in Thailand there's a great taboo against stepping over objects like that.

Someone pointed this out to Ajaan Lee one day, so Ajaan Lee turned to Ajaan Fuang and said, "Okay, tomorrow get all the monks down there and move it." Now, Ajaan Fuang knew it couldn't be moved. It was firmly planted in the ground. But he knew that if he said it couldn't be done, Ajaan Lee would say, "Well, in that case, I'll find someone else who does have the conviction it can be done."

So the next morning, Ajaan Fuang got all the able-bodied monks and novices under the ordination hall, wrapped ropes around the thing and tried to pull it, used crowbars to try and pry it up, but nothing worked. So that evening he went to see Ajaan Lee and said, "How about if we make a new cornerstone box, put it under the Buddha image, open up the old one, and move all the valuable sacred things from the old box into the new one?" So Ajaan Lee nodded his head Yes, and that's what was done.

The point wasn't just that Ajaan Fuang just went ahead and tried what Ajaan Lee told him to do, in spite of his doubts. It was he also tried to think up a solution on his own and to present that. That's the ingenuity aspect of the practice. It's not that you say, "Well, I've got this problem," and you go running to the teacher and say, "Okay, solve the problem for me." You want to try your own solutions first. In that way, you become your own teacher, you become your own explorer of the Dhamma. And you develop sensitivity, as you do this, to what you're doing. You develop sensitivity to the results of what you're doing. And, as the Buddha said, you use your actions like this as a mirror to watch your mind.

That's how you purify the mind. That's how you purify the heart.

So these are good basic principles to keep in mind as you practice, so that you can find that happiness that you want, the happiness that won't let you down.