

Dhamma Intelligence

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Ajaan Fuang used to note that most of Ajaan Lee's books are guides to action. They gave the basic principles of what you do, and how to think about what you're doing. It's important to keep that principle in mind: The Dhamma is not about words, even though it's expressed in words. The words are meant to focus on what your actions are, what kind of results you're getting out of them, and teaching you questions to ask, things to look for, so as to start acting more skillfully.

There's an awful lot that the Buddha didn't address, the big questions of his day: Is the world eternal, non-eternal, finite, infinite? Is the soul the same thing as the body or something else? When a person is fully awakened or has reached the goal of the spiritual life, does that person still exist or not exist? Both? Neither? The Buddha refused to answer any of these questions, and people would get very upset.

They felt that he was being ignorant not only of the big issues of the day, but what they saw as *the* big issues of life. They felt that you couldn't really determine how to live your life until you'd figured out the world or figured out the nature of the soul. In other words, they felt that you had to start with abstractions that are far away, and then move in to decide what you should and shouldn't do.

The Buddha moved in the other direction. He would have you observe your actions and see what results you were getting in terms of an issue that you could see directly: Does this action lead to pain or does it lead to lack of pain?

Answering that question requires a different set of talents. Arguing from big principles outside requires that you learn a little bit about logic, and about persuasion, how to define terms, how to manipulate words. But working from your actions requires that you be observant, that you develop certain qualities of the mind so that your judgments about your actions will be true and useful.

This is why, when the Buddha summarized *the* main teachings that he left behind in the wings to awakening, they're all qualities of mind. You're going to

know the Dhamma only when you develop those qualities of mind.

So it's not a matter of figuring out first principles, defining your terms, and then building a logical structure based on that. The Buddha was actually quite critical of that kind of philosophy. Instead, recommends develop qualities of the *character*.

Start with something simple like staying with the breath. You might ask yourself, "What can you learn from the breath?" In fact, there was actually a forest ajaan one time who asked Ajaan Lee, "Why do you teach people breath meditation? What is there to see in the breath? It's just in, out, in, out." And as Ajaan Lee said, "Well, if that's all you see, then that's all there is." The implication being that if you're more perceptive, you're going to see more.

How do you become more perceptive? You have to start out by being more alert, more mindful, more ardent in what you're doing. And here the question of figuring things out is not one of figuring things out from first principles. You figure things out from what you're trying to do. If it's not getting the desired results, what are you doing wrong? And what could you do that's right? That kind of figuring out the Buddha encouraged. It's not that we're here simply to follow instructions without reflecting on what we're doing. We have to reflect, but reflect in terms of action and result, right here, right now.

You may have seen those photos they took of séances back in the nineteenth century where they claimed to be able to show ectoplasm coming out of a person's head. Well, that's how a lot of our minds work. We build worlds outside and around us, and then we try to inhabit those larger ectoplasmic worlds. It's a different talent to be here just with your body and say, "I'm going to focus on the body right here, right now" and not go out very far from the skin. Any thoughts that go for more than a few inches outside of your skin, you've just got to let them drop.

If you want to think inside the body, that's fine. After all, directed thought and evaluation are factors of the first jhāna, but you want to make sure that they don't refer to anything beyond the limits you set for yourself here. So you think about the breath. You think about the mind as it tries to relate to the breath. You evaluate these things. There's plenty to think about, plenty to figure out.

Especially if you're the sort of person who has trouble settling down, you're going to have to figure out what's getting in the way.

That means paying a lot of very careful attention right here, right now—not to the abstractions, but to the actual events and sensations going on right now. The things the mind is saying to itself right now: Those are the things you want to analyze. Those are the things you want to be sensitive to. It may seem like you're restricting yourself greatly, but there's a lot to be learned if you really pay careful attention in this restricted range right here. Don't be too proud to focus on the little things.

As Ajaan Lee said, the Buddha was a large person. His mouth was so big that it would deliver a sermon that would be remembered for thousands of years, it would reverberate around the world for thousands of years. But before he had a mouth that big, he had to close his mouth. He had to make himself small, to content himself with watching the breath, seeing what could be learned about the mind as he got the mind to watch the breath. It showed itself in the distractions it created.

You learn a lot about the inner workings of the mind when you can figure out why it likes these distractions. That means you have to set yourself up against the distractions. This is why we work on concentration, giving the mind a good solid basis right here, and then seeing when it wants to leave that solid basis—and you don't go with it.

All too often, our thoughts flash out, and we try to follow them. It's like going out with a flashlight on a foggy night, and seeing the beam going into the fog, and thinking, "How far does this beam go?" So you just keep following, following, following what looks like the far end of the beam. Of course, it goes further and further and further away as you try to approach it. If you're going to look at anything, look at the bulb—in other words, what you've got right here, right now, in the mind. Don't wandering away.

There's plenty to figure out right here, but it's a different kind of figuring out: how to be more resolute, how to be more ardent, how to be more heedful as you practice in this practice of staying with the breath. If the mind doesn't want to settle down with the breath, you can give it other things to think about for a

while. The Buddha recommends topics like recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, recollection of your generosity, recollection of your virtue. Those are to give you encouragement.

Then there's recollection of death, which is to remind you that you don't know how much time you have, so there's definitely work to be done right now. You can ask yourself, "Are you ready to go?" And the answer is usually, "Well no, not yet." For the time being, we can get away with that "not yet," but there will come a point where you say, "Well, not yet," and they say, "Sorry, time's up. Got to go." And you don't know when it's going to happen. The proper response when you think about that is to look back here at the breath, to really get to know what's going on right here, right now.

As the Buddha said, when you focus properly on the breath, you get a sense of the breath as bodily fabrication. You also begin to see mental fabrication, verbal fabrication as they're happening right here, right now, and you gain some control over them. That's going to be really helpful. That'll be a necessary skill as you approach death: to see how the mind fabricates things, and to watch out for any unskillful fabrications that'll come up. Your practical experience, your hands-on experience in saying "No" to your distractions, will help you say "No" to the things that could pull you in the wrong direction.

So, working on skills requires a kind of intelligence that's different from the intelligence that figures things out in the abstract. You have to learn how to start with the little issues right here, right now, when the mind slips off from the breath. Why is it going? And why does it go again? And then, why does it go again? The reasons may be different each time. Can you figure out when the decision is made in the mind to go?

This is when you start seeing the different layers of conversation going on in the mind. There will be a conversation someplace in the mind that says, "Okay, when the main attention is not quite on us, we're going to slip out." Then it'll pretend that it hadn't made that decision. And there's part of the mind that's content to let itself lie to itself.

You're not going to see that when you're dealing in abstractions, but you can see it as you focus on this path, focus on this skill. This is why the Buddha, when

he illustrated the practice, often compared it to developing manual skills: how to be a good cook, how to be a good archer, how to be a good soldier. It requires that kind of intelligence. And this is why he was very clear about what kind of questions deserved answers and which kinds didn't.

The questions having to do with what is suffering right now, what's causing it, how can we put an end to it?: Those questions are worth trying to figure out, trying to answer as best you can—through your own powers of observation. Questions about the nature of the world, about the self: You put those aside.

When you can keep your focus in line with the breath, in line with the present moment, in line with those good qualities of the mind, the good qualities of the heart and the character you have to develop to really see what's going on, and to learn how to say, "No" to impulses that would pull you in the wrong direction: That's when you're using your intelligence in the right way.