

Worries & Regrets

June 22, 2018

By the time I went to stay with him, Ajaan Fuang very rarely accepted invitations to meals outside of the monastery. And when he did, he asked that he not be asked to chant. He said he'd be happy to discuss the Dhamma, but he didn't want to give house-blessings. That was for us younger monks.

There was one time when one of his students invited him to her home, and the student's sister—who'd been meditating with another teacher—had some meditation questions. She started out by saying, "The whole purpose of meditation is to make your mind empty, right?" And Ajaan Fuang said, "No. If you leave your mind empty, it's like leaving the door to your home open. Anyone can come in."

We've all noticed this. You try to settle down with the breath and be quiet and all of a sudden thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future, things you regret about the past, things you're worried about in the future come barging in. So simply doing the concentration is often not enough to keep them at bay. Sometimes you *can* just tell yourself, "I'm not going to go there," and the mind obeys. One good trick is, as soon as a thought comes in and starts speaking to you, you just refuse to understand the language. Try to cut the connections between the words and the mind so that it becomes gibberish. Scramble the signal.

But there are other times when that's not enough. That's when you have to develop the right attitude toward the topic that's distracting you. The Buddha didn't teach just a meditation technique. He also taught attitudes to go along with the technique for training the mind: reasons for training the mind, ways to think so that unskillful thoughts don't come in and take over. In this way, you're not leaving the mind empty. You're giving it work to do.

One important thing to think about is the principle of karma, along with the immensity of rebirth. We sometimes think about things in this lifetime that we regret. The Buddha would have you cast your mind away from the present moment for the time being and just think about how far back into the past we've been trying to find happiness: struggling along, dying and being reborn again, struggling some more, dying and being reborn again. And the whole process is run by craving and clinging. "Clinging" in Pali, *upadana*, can also mean feeding. We're feeding off of one another in an endless process of feeding, feeding, and feeding, getting a little bit of satisfaction and then not having any satisfaction anymore and having to feed some more—just think about how long this has been going on,

and how many stupid things you've done in the course of all that time. They become so many that they become meaningless. And that's the whole point: You want to make it meaningless, so that the individual instances don't have a big impact on the mind.

Then you come back to the present, "See, here I'm doing something good with my time right now." Because this is the area in which you can be responsible. You're not responsible for going back and changing things in the past. As the Buddha said, no matter how much you regret what you've done in the past, you can't go back and change it. But you *can* make up your mind right now that if you recognize that you've made mistakes, just tell yourself, "I don't want to make that mistake again." That's the most that can be asked of a human being.

We're not expected to be perfect as we come here. The Buddha doesn't say that you have to have your virtue perfect before you can sit down and meditate. We're all coming from ignorance, we're all coming from a lot of wrong ideas and wrong actions in the past. Now we're trying to straighten the mind out, and that's the whole point: that we *can* straighten it out. As the Buddha said, if we couldn't abandon unskillful qualities and unskillful actions, he wouldn't have taught us to do so. If we couldn't develop skillful ones in their place, he wouldn't have taught us to do so, either. It's because we can make these changes: That's why we're practicing. That's why he taught.

In addition to recognizing your mistakes, try to have goodwill. Goodwill is your protection for the future, in the sense that the things you really regret most are when you did something out of ill will, out of a desire to harm, and then the harm actually came about. It suddenly hits you that you really shouldn't have done that, that you should have known better. That's the kind of regret that hurts the most and festers the most. The mistakes you make out of goodwill are a lot easier to deal with. You just didn't know, you were ignorant, but there was nothing wrong with your intention in the sense of its being bad. That kind of mistake is a lot easier to live with.

That's why the Buddha encouraged his son, "Before you act, ask yourself, 'Is this action going to harm anybody?' If you see that it's going to harm somebody, you just don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, go ahead and do it. While you're doing it, you check, 'Is there any unexpected harm coming up?' If there is, you stop." Because you have to remember the principle of karma: Some actions take a while to show their results and other actions show their results immediately, in fact they actually shape the present moment. If you see any harm coming up, you have the ability to stop. If you don't see any harm, you keep on doing it.

When you're done, then you look at the long-term results. If you see that harm *was* done, then you can talk it over with someone, get some advice from someone who's more advanced on the path. Learn how not to be too ashamed to admit your mistakes. Because if you can't admit your mistakes to other people, after a while you start putting yourself in a position where you can't admit them to yourself—and then you can't learn. So that old principle of learning from your mistakes: This is how you do it so that the mistakes don't leave too big a scar. Because as I said, you start out with the intention not to harm. That protects you from having to deal with a lot of really bad regret on into the future.

Sometimes, of course, as the mind gets open and relaxed here in the present moment, thoughts of the future come in: things you're worried about. You have to remind yourself that you don't really know what's going to happen in the future, but you *do* know that you're here meditating right now, and the best way you can prepare for unknowns is to develop as much mindfulness and alertness and discernment as you can—and that's what you're doing. So the best way to prepare for the future, the best way to deal with thoughts that come up and say, "How is this going to be? How is that going to be? I don't know if I can handle this," is simply to remind yourself, "Okay, if I'm more mindful and alert, I'll be able to deal with situations as they arise." Because there are always going to be unexpected things arising. This is how you prepare for the unexpected: by developing mindfulness and alertness around the breath right now.

So in both cases, you're thinking about the past and thinking about the future, but if you think about them in the right way, that pulls you back to the present moment to develop the qualities you know you're going to need so that you don't have to repeat your past mistakes and you'll be ready for unexpected things as they come.

So as you meditate, it's not just a matter of emptying the mind in the present moment. You give it work to do. You've got to change your attitudes. You can't just tell the mind, "Okay, just do this technique and you'll be okay." You have to have the right understanding behind it.

This is why the Buddha put right view at the beginning of the path. Of course, there are ways in which he describes the progress along the path in which discernment comes last. But a certain amount of discernment, a certain amount of understanding, has to be there at the beginning. You start with right view. It's not right knowledge—it's not going to be knowledge until the end of the path—but you can tell yourself, "These are the opinions I need to hold to. These are the opinions I need to adopt as my working hypotheses." Then you have to keep teaching the mind those opinions, because it has a lot of old unskillful opinions

still sloshing around inside. So you can't just hope that a technique of noting or a technique of... whatever, is going to take care of all those problems. Right understanding has to go with this, to motivate you to practice and to keep your practice on course.

And also to deal with the distractions that come up, no matter which direction they pull you, to the past or the future. Sometimes you have to cut them a little slack. In other words, think about the past a little bit, but think about it in a way that's going to bring you back to the present moment. The same with the future: Think about the future a little bit and then remind yourself that the best preparation for the future is to meditate. As for the thoughts that come up after that, learn how to chop them up. As you breathe in, think of the breath scattering the thoughts. Or you can think of the breath as a big broom sweeping through the body, sweeping through the mind, sweeping those thoughts away. That way, you can settle down and actually strengthen the mind here in the present moment, so that it has the strength to maintain those right views, maintain the right perspective.

This is how discernment and your concentration go together and help each other along. All too often you hear the question, "How much concentration do I need before I can practice insight?" But that's not a useful way to think. The two have to go together. The Buddha never taught them as totally separate practices. Ideally they should go together, insight and concentration. Your insight develops your concentration; your concentration develops your insight. But remember that you need both, so that the concentration can strengthen the insight and the insight can help protect the concentration. It's when the path has all its factors functioning together that it can really do its work.