

Outside the Box

July 11, 2018

As the Buddha once said, “All phenomena are rooted in desire”—the word “phenomena” here covering everything except for nibbana. This means that the path is rooted in desire, just as our defilements are rooted in desire, the difference being that some desires are skillful and some are not. The skillful ones have some wisdom in them. There’s no such thing as just brute desire, without any ideas behind it. There’s always a view that directs your desire, a view of what’s worth doing, a view of what’s okay to do. Which means that right effort has to include a lot of discernment.

The Buddha never taught mere brute effort, brute willpower. He taught that effort has to be guided. This is why when Ajaan Lee talks about the different mental qualities that go into mindfulness practice—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—he assigns wisdom and discernment to ardency, as in knowing how to stir yourself up to put up an appropriate effort. After all, the practice does require that we do some things we don’t like to do, and that we abstain from some things we like doing.

If it were simply a matter of following your likes, everybody would have gained awakening a long time ago. The path goes against the grain sometimes. And it’s at times like that, as the Buddha said, that you really test your discernment, knowing how to talk yourself into wanting to do the practice, and talking yourself into wanting to abstain from things that get in the way of the practice. It’s when you find yourself having trouble getting up early in the morning, or staying up late at night, or putting extra energy into the practice while you’re sitting here right now: Ask yourself what desires are getting in the way and what views are informing those desires, and how you can work your way around them.

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, somehow the topic of sexual desire came up one day. I mentioned something about how the body wants it, and he said, “The body doesn’t want anything at all. It’s the mind. The body can live perfectly fine without getting involved. It’s the mind that wants these things.”

That was a way of looking at the issue that had never occurred to me before, because I was always justifying my desires by saying, “Well, this is what the body needs.” But as he said, “The body doesn’t need sex at all, or eight hours of sleep at night.” You find that when you meditate, your sleep needs go down, because a lot of the rest that the mind needs you can actually get while you’re meditating. In fact, sometimes it’s more restful than sleep.

So ask yourself, when a desire comes up—either to do something that’s against the practice, or not to do something that’s involved in the practice—what’s the view behind that? What reasons does the mind give? Sometimes it’s very parsimonious and very secretive about its reasons. Which means probably that its reasons are pretty bad. Other times it will say, “Well of course,” and then it goes on to say what it thinks is so obvious that there’s no need to talk about it. Those are the reasons you’ve got to question. Learn how to question them. Look at them from different angles.

This is where it’s useful to read Dhamma books, to get ideas of other ways of looking at what’s going on in your mind. I was reading recently a passage by Ajaan Funn, Ajaan Suwat’s teacher, in which he was talking about how doctors usually tell us that the causes of diseases come from outside, but the potential for disease, he says, is already there in the body. You’re born with the potential for things to malfunction. The body can malfunction just as easily as it can function well. So it’s perfectly normal for things to get diseased, and a lot of times the problem is inside the body. It doesn’t come from the germs. It’s because the body’s own resistance is not up to things. Which puts a different spin on health and what we think of is our right to health, or the thinking that the body should be functioning in a particular way.

So it’s good to read Dhamma books that give you a new perspective on things. Look at things from another angle, so that when the mind comes up with, “Of course, I’ve got to rest,” or “Of course I can’t do this,” or “Of course I’ve got to do that,” you can start questioning the *of-course-ness* of those ideas. This is how your wisdom grows. You begin to think outside the box, which is something you need to learn how to do because awakening is not going to be in the box at all. The box of your ideas of what’s possible and what’s normal will have to change if you’re

going to find something that's beyond your ordinary sense of what's possible. Awakening is not normal. What's normal is aging, illness, and death. That's what nature has for us. But we're not here just to follow nature, at least the nature of looking for survival. We're looking for something better. We're looking for true happiness.

This is where the Buddha's teachings part ways with modern science. Modern science—or modern materialism—says that the body is all about survival. We're biological organisms and that's our main purpose. But the Buddha says, No, our purpose is to find happiness. This is what that “rooted in desire” means. We desire happiness, well-being, bliss—however you want to translate the Pali word *sukha*. We simply have to gain new ideas about what that bliss is, what that happiness can be, and how best to go about it. We have to think outside the box if we're not going to be boxed in by aging, illness, and death.

So it's not simply a matter of willpower. It's a matter of talking yourself into having right view that will inform your efforts as to what's worthwhile, what's a good use of your time and energy, and how much you're willing to sacrifice. In the forest tradition they often ask, “Are you afraid to die?” Anywhere else in the world, it would be normal to respond, “Well, yes,” but for them the obvious answer is, “No, I'm here to find something that's worth dying for.” The practice requires that kind of dedication, and the views that go along with that.

And here we're willing to die for something that's really good, a happiness that doesn't harm anybody. We begin by seeing that death is not the worst thing possible. The worst thing possible is to do something unskillful, and the biggest loss is when you have an opportunity to practice and you throw it away. The loss that comes from loss of health, loss of wealth, even loss of relatives, the Buddha said, that doesn't drag you down to hell. It's loss in terms of your view, loss in terms of your virtue, that can. So look at your views. Try to develop a sense of values that is outside the ordinary, and learn how to question things you haven't been questioning before.

Ajaan Maha Boowa has some good questions for questioning pain. When you first read them, they sound kind of strange, such as, “Is the pain the same thing as your knee?” But then you begin to realize, part of your mind actually believes that

it is, and you wouldn't have thought about that unless you'd asked the question.

So learn to ask yourself unexpected questions. When the food is not up to what you expect, you can ask yourself, "Well, am I here to eat?" And there's part of the mind says, "Yes, I'm here to eat," but another part—the part you want to listen to—says, "No, we're here to practice." Where there are chores around the monastery and you say, "This is hard to do," remind yourself: "Isn't this an opportunity to make merit?" There are opportunities for merit all over the place. Every leaf out of place on the road is an opportunity for merit. Every little thing out of order is an opportunity to make merit.

This is why we don't assign jobs for everybody or, at least, hover over you to make sure certain jobs are done. There are certain jobs in the monastery that are left for people to want to do. And so sometimes the chores may get tedious, if you find that you're the only one who's doing a particular chore, but remind yourself that you're just stocking up on merit. Look at it in a different way, as an opportunity rather than a chore.

In fact, this may be one area where it's really useful to stop and think what your attitudes toward merit are. It's one of those concepts that doesn't get much good press in Western Buddhism, but it's what drives a lot of Buddhist practice: the realization that, yes, even though we are here to learn how to let go, but still, to let go, we have to develop good qualities in the mind. And one of the best ways of developing them is to start on the ground, in other words, with basic chores.

I remember when I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, he made a comment one evening, "All too many people think that the practice is just about letting go, letting go, but it's also about developing, too." At the time, I didn't appreciate what he was saying, but over time I began to. You can't expect the ajaan to give you pep talks all the time, you've got to develop your own ability to come up with new questions, come up with new ways of looking at an issue so that you're happy to develop good qualities in mind and to keep on building them, even if nobody recognizes, or seems to recognize, what's happening. There is an objective quality to the merit of a mind that's always looking to do what's good.

I was reading recently about a study where they had noticed how kids in industrialized countries tend not to learn how to do chores around the house,

whereas kids in more traditional societies do, and they're happy to do them. And they're happier in general as a result. It turns out that there's a particular age where kids really want to be helpful. They want to do real jobs around the house. If the parents are wise enough to put up with the fact that the kids are not yet expert at these things and can be somewhat clumsy: If they're willing to put up with that and give them pointers on how to do things properly, eventually the kids become really helpful, and they enjoy being helpful. And that's wise. It's wise to encourage this attitude, and it's wise for them.

So this is what merit is all about: finding joy in being helpful as a way of nourishing that part of the mind that wants not only happiness, but a happiness that doesn't harm anybody. A happiness that's actually good for other people. Not all of us here practicing are going to be able to teach the Dhamma to other people, but you can be a good influence. You can be a good example. So in that way, your Dhamma practice does help others. When you take joy in finding happiness that doesn't harm anybody, that comes from this desire to be helpful.

So learn to think outside of the box so that your old ideas don't box you in—and remember that awakening doesn't lie in the box, either. Find new ways of thinking, find new ways of viewing things until the effort becomes something you really want to do, and the desire to stick with the practice energizes your path. Find ways of thinking that keep that energy going and build it to higher and higher levels. Even when the body seems to be weak, you want to make the mind strong, not just through brute willpower, but strong through the realization that doing the practice is good.

We learn from practice that meditation can be really comfortable, really energizing. Keeping that in the back of your mind should always help you on days when it's hard to get up or hard to stay up. It might just happen that this time, things click, and you'll be glad you made that extra effort.