

Everybody Benefits

October 16, 2011

There's a principle in Indian dramatic theory that the happiest plays are those in which there's a main plot where the hero or heroine gains a desired objective, and a subsidiary plot where a friend of the hero or the heroine also gains his or her objective, and the two of them help each other along. In other words, the main plot doesn't work without the subplot; the subplot doesn't work without the main plot. Both people come out winning at the end. That's the happiest kind of play.

The same principle applies in the relationship between the monastics and the laity. The monastics need time to practice, need the support of the laity in order to practice full-time. The laity, in return, need contact with people who are giving their whole lives to the practice so that they're not just stuck with other laypeople as their teachers who are giving half-time to the practice. That way, they gain more reliable guidance in their path and they gain the benefits of all the forms of merit: generosity, virtue, meditation.

It's through this symbiotic relationship that everybody benefits.

This becomes especially dramatic on a day like today with the *kathin*. There's been a lot of activity. A lot of people had to be fed. They came to support the monastery, to support us in our practice, so we have a responsibility. We have to make sure that they're happy in their generosity.

The Buddha once said there are six characteristics of a really happy gift, three pertaining to the donor and three pertaining to the recipient.

The donor is happy beforehand while thinking about giving the gift, happy while giving the gift, and then gratified when looking back on the fact that it was a good gift, it was a good thing to give that gift.

As for the recipient, the recipient either has to be free of greed, aversion, and delusion or on the path to be free of greed, aversion, and delusion.

When you look at it in one way, of the six characteristics, the three that apply to the donor are the donor's responsibility and the three that apply to the recipient are the recipient's responsibility. But they're actually mutual responsibilities.

In other words, when you receive a gift, you have to behave in such a way that before giving the donor feels good, while giving and after giving the donor feels good, satisfied that it was really worthwhile, giving that gift. This means that we don't pressure people into giving beforehand. We receive the gift with respect.

And then we use it well after we've received it.

At the same time, the donor has to look for people who are practicing for the end of greed, aversion, and delusion, and then respect their need for time.

It's a mutually beneficial relationship we have going here—if everybody takes care of their responsibilities.

So now that we're waiting for the cloth to dry, let's work a little bit on getting rid of our greed, aversion, and delusion. In particular, we want to work on the delusion because that underlies all the other defilements.

Try to develop a quality of knowingness in the mind. This means being very honest with yourself as to what's actually going on and trying to be as alert as possible—and developing equanimity so that you can really see what's actually happening.

In Thai when they're talking about the knower or awareness itself, they're basically talking about this quality of equanimity: the part of the mind that simply receives things, knows what's happening, basically registers what's happening and just looks on.

Now, that quality of just registering is not going to be enough. It really helps see through a lot of things that you didn't see before, but it also has to be motivated by the desire to see *through* them—particularly, to see through the things that are causing suffering.

Even though equanimous awareness may seem totally without preference, it is motivated by the desire to see things clearly in a way that you haven't seen them before. So be very clear about that desire, understanding that it's necessary for this quality of knowingness to develop.

We work with the breath, trying to be alert to all the different ways the breath is moving in the body and to all the different levels of the breath, so that we can also become more and more alert to different levels in the mind: levels of awareness that may get covered over by our ordinary concerns, our ordinary desires, our ordinary considerations.

There are many layers to your awareness, in the same way that there are many layers to the currents in the ocean. I was reading a little while back that in addition to the currents that move along the surface of the ocean or just below the surface, there are some very deep ones. Apparently there's one current in the Atlantic where the water drops down near Antarctica because it's so cold. Then it travels along the bottom and goes up north, and many hundreds of years later that water finally arrives up at the northern part of the Atlantic.

It's like that in the body. There are some levels of breath energy that are very still, others that have a constant flow, others that flow back-and-forth. We try to

become sensitive to these, because the more you can know about the breath, how it's acting in the body, the more you become sensitive to different parts of your own awareness that you didn't know were there before—and in particular, this part of the mind that's just watching.

Sometimes when you read about the different teachers who emphasize just watching the mind or observing the mind, you might say, “Why are we spending so much time with the breath? Why aren't we focusing directly on the mind?” Well, working with the breath helps expand your sensitivities, making you sensitive to areas of the mind you wouldn't have known otherwise.

If you just flowed along the surface of whatever defilement is coming your way and just tried to accept that, you wouldn't really learn much. There are many layers of the mind that go totally unexplored. So as you're watching the breath, try to get things as still as possible so that you can see the subtler layers.

Ajaan Lee talks about breath energy circling around in place or constantly moving in one direction. There's an energy that comes up from the soles of the feet, that goes up the legs and up the back, up through the spine, and it's always going up. Notice when you need that, as when your back is feeling weak or when your posture is bad. Remind yourself that there is this level of energy coming up, coming up, coming up that can give you strength.

When there are parts of the body that you realize you've been ignoring, you want to really be conscious to expand your awareness to keep them in mind. You find that you become more and more aware not only of the breath there, but also of those areas of your awareness. Things open up more. There are fewer blind spots in the mind where your defilements can hide.

These are some of the ways in which working with the breath helps us to overcome delusion. We see the process of fabrication and we try to calm it, so that the blatant levels of fabrication can get out of the way and we can see the subtler levels and just keep on going in, in, in like this. In that way, we get to the subtler levels of our awareness that can give us a more solid foundation, so that the gifts that people give to us as meditators really do bear them great fruit.

That's one of the motivations we have for practicing. We're not the only ones who benefit. When people give things to us and we've used those things well, the donors gain a sense of happiness, a sense of satisfaction that the gift really did accomplish something worthwhile.

So when we're feeling lazy, we can think of this as our responsibility. But if we're feeling too weighed down by responsibilities, we can remind ourselves that this is how true happiness comes about. This is one of the fine things of the Buddha's teaching: that by pursuing our own best interests we're also acting in the

interest of other people. There are very few courses of action in the world for which that is true.