

# *One Thing Clear Through*

*August 4, 2020*

There's a series of questions called the Novice's Questions. It's like a catechism for young monks and young nuns. It starts with "What is One?" and goes through, "What is Two? ...Three? ...Four?" up to Ten.

And the most interesting question and answer is "What is One?" "All beings subsist on food." The fact that we're beings means that we have to eat, both physical food and mental food. We're taking things in, in order to sustain our identity as a being that we've created through our attachments.

Now, the purpose of the practice is to go beyond being a being. Unbinding, nibbana, is a state where there's no feeding, no attachment at all. Because as the Buddha said, feeding, attachment, clinging: It's all suffering.

For a lot of us, that's our pleasure in life: taking things in. But the practice of the Dhamma is going to be turning us around, so that we start taking pleasure in giving things away, radiating goodness out instead of trying to suck it in. After all, when you're feeding, you take in what you hope will be good things from the world. You're looking for pleasure, and then you excrete—what? Greed, aversion, delusion. We're trying to change that exchange here as we practice.

Look at the Buddha's Graduated Discourse, his analysis of the steps of the path leading up to being ready for the four noble truths. They start with giving, and the Buddha talks about the pleasures that come from giving, the happiness, the sense of inner worth that comes from giving. He describes the joy, the sense of self-worth that come when you're able to give, when you can be generous. Instead of trying to find happiness by taking things in, you try to find happiness by giving good things out.

The same with virtue: As the Buddha said, virtue is a gift. You're giving the gift of safety. You decide that you're not going to harm *anybody*: You're not going to kill anybody or steal anything from anyone, have illicit sex with anyone, lie to anyone, take intoxicants in any cases. He says when you give this gift of universal safety—what he means by that is that everybody in the world has nothing to fear from you, at least—you're going to have a share in that universal safety, too.

So you begin to see that by putting good things out into the world, you're also getting good things in return. Because as the Buddha found, even though suffering comes down to clinging and feeding, you can't simply stop feeding. The path requires that you feed, but feed in a skillful way. You're feeding off the goodness that comes reflecting back when you're radiating goodness out.

From there he goes on to the rewards of generosity and virtue, not only in this life but also, as he says, in heaven: lots of sensual pleasures, good things that come from good qualities of the

mind. But those good things are not nearly as good as the qualities of the mind. If you start trying to feed on things outside, the mind deteriorates. You can imagine what it's like living in a land where there's nothing but pleasure all the time: Everything you can think of, everything you would want keeps coming back, right there when you want it. You get spoiled. But then when the goodness of that good karma you've developed finally wears out, you fall. When you fall, it hurts.

This is where the Buddha said you start thinking about the drawbacks, even the degradation, in sensuality. If you're generous and you're virtuous because of the rewards you're going to expect to get back in terms of sensual pleasures, it's just going to pull you down.

When you see this, you're ready to think that maybe there's happiness in renunciation, in just really giving up sensual thinking. And at that point, he says, you're ready for the four noble truths. But even here there's feeding. You look into the fourth noble truth, the factor of right concentration: That becomes your new food on the path. It's the food of the Middle Way. As the Buddha said in his first sermon, the Middle Way is the middle way between indulgence in sensual pleasures and indulgence in self-torture. But that doesn't mean it's a middling feeling. It's a different kind of pleasure, the pleasure of form, which doesn't have the drawbacks of the pleasures of sensuality.

You focus on the breath, you become aware of the breath energy throughout the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. As you can develop a sense of ease in the breathing, you allow that to spread so that it fills the body as well. That becomes your food on the path. But as you do this, you're also radiating good energy out into the world.

One of the ways of developing right concentration is not just focusing on the breath, but also focusing on goodwill, goodwill for all beings. This is something we need, especially now. You look at the difficulties the world is going through. A lot of people are desperate. We've had a healthy economy and it's crashed. People have been used to feeding well. They're like the devas: When they don't feed well anymore, they get frustrated. So a lot of the turmoil we're seeing right now, from the top on down, is basically frustrated feeding. The question is, do you want to join in that feeding frenzy or do you want to step out?

Think of the Buddha's vision before he gained awakening. The world was like a dwindling stream and there were fish in the stream fighting one another over the water. Of course, they're all going to die, and the water is going to run out. But in the meantime, they create a lot of bad karma for themselves and a lot of suffering in their efforts to get that last little bit of water. As the Buddha said, he looked everywhere and there was nothing that wasn't already laid claim to.

The solution was to not look for happiness outside, not to look to feed outside, not to be taking things in, but to radiate goodness out instead. And goodwill is one way of doing that. You want to make your goodwill universal, for everybody. What does that mean? As the Buddha said, people find happiness through their actions, so you're wishing that they will all act

in a skillful way. You're not saying, "May they be happy simply as they are." There are a lot of people doing a lot of unskillful things. Your wish is that they learn how to change their ways.

The question is, "Is there anyone out there that you can't wish that for?" And you might think of some people, people who've done a *lot* of unskillful things, and it doesn't seem right that they not suffer some, at least, before they find the way to true happiness. But why have ill will for them? Why ask for them to have even more suffering? They're going to be suffering anyhow from their past actions. And it's not the case that when people suffer, they begin to realize the error of their ways. All too often, they dish out more suffering, excrete more greed, aversion, and delusion into the world. It would be much better if they learned how to handle even their bad karma from the past in a skillful way.

As in the Buddha's image, he says when you have universal goodwill—when your mind is unlimited, you've trained yourself in virtue and discernment, you've trained it so that it's not overcome by pain, not overcome by pleasure—then whatever past bad actions you've done are not going to have an impact on the mind. It's like someone who has a lot of wealth: If he faces a fine for some misbehavior, he can pay it back easily because he's got wealth to spare. If, however, your mind is narrow—you have no goodwill for others or only for a few people; no training in virtue, no training in discernment; your mind is easily overcome by pain, easily overcome by pleasure—then you're like a poor person who suddenly faces a fine. You have nothing to pay the fine with so you get thrown in jail.

So when people who *have* been behaving in an unskillful way, if they could learn how to behave skillfully and develop good qualities of the mind, they would suffer a lot less. And when they suffer less, they'd be less likely to pour more suffering, excrete more suffering out into the world. So the wise policy is to have goodwill for everybody regardless—to keep radiating goodness out.

And now that you've got the mind in concentration, you've got a more solid basis for your goodness. When you're radiating goodness from generosity and virtue, you've got to go on conviction, you've got to go on a lot of internal conversation where you tell yourself that this is a good thing. But when you have the sense of ease and well-being, even the sense of rapture and fullness that can come from the concentration, then it's a lot easier to be radiating goodness out, because you're producing more nourishment inside.

You develop the five strengths: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment. These are a food for the mind that's special in the sense that it can make the mind so strong that it ultimately doesn't need to feed. It can see where its greed and aversion and delusion are coming from, and it can abandon them.

So you can see that the path is, all along the way, one of giving rather than taking in. It's in line with Luang Pu Dune's comment, "Everything in the world come in pairs, but the Dhamma is one thing clear through." Instead of taking in, taking in, taking in, you're giving out, giving out.

Then you find that you're wealthier, stronger, more nourished as a result. You're no longer in the position where you're trying to take good things in and it's like having a vacuum cleaner: You turn it on and you start sucking things in and, well, anything can come in. When the mind is in that in-taking mode, good things come in, bad things come in. You're totally dependent on the world outside being just a certain way if you want to get some pleasure out of that process. But the world's not going to stay that way. It keeps changing. You could create an ideal society where everybody was wonderful, and it still would fall apart. And if you're still on the in-take mode, then you'd have nothing but bad things to take in again.

So the mind is in a much better position when it's finding its happiness, one, out of radiating goodness rather than trying to take it in, and two, finally getting to the point where it doesn't need to feed or take anything in from any direction at all. It's totally self-sufficient.

That's the point, as the Buddha said, where you're no longer a being, because there's no longer any attachment. You can't be described. When the Buddha was asked, "When an arahant passes away, does he or she still exist? Or not exist? Or both? Or neither?" he refused to answer in any way. After all, to answer a question like that, you'd have to define the terms. What is an arahant? *An arahant's not defined.* We are all defined by our clingings and cravings, our attachments. With an arahant, though, there are none of those things. This is hard to imagine, because we're constantly taking things in, in, in. But when we learn instead to find the pleasure that comes from radiating goodness out, we get some inkling of how that would be a much better way to live, where you didn't have to take things in.

This becomes especially apparent as we begin to see society breaking down. The things that we used to depend on are not necessarily going to be there. So try to put yourself in the mode where you don't need to take things in. Then you can radiate goodness out. And even before you get to solid states of concentration, there is the goodness of generosity, there's the goodness of virtue. You can radiate *that* out. Even if your goodwill isn't yet a solidly based universal goodwill founded on concentration, radiate whatever goodwill you can manage—or compassion, or empathetic joy, or equanimity when it's appropriate. But always think about what you can give, rather than what you can take in.

That puts your relationship to the world on a much better footing, a much more solid footing. Because the goodness then is something *you* can create, you don't have to wait for the world to create it for you. And it *is* something you can do.