

The Mind's Ostinato

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In music, they have the term *ostinato*, which means a theme that's repeated over and over and over again, usually in the bass. The mind has its *ostinato*, too. You dig down deep enough, and you find it asking a question all the time: "What's next? What to do next? What to do next?" If the answer's clear, the mind tends to be happy. If it's not clear, if there are confusing signals being sent, then it gets uncertain, ill at ease.

So, to get your mind settled in right now with a sense of certainty and ease, just tell yourself that you're going to do one thing right now. You're going to stay with the breath—all the way in, all the way out. You don't have to go anywhere else.

There will still be some questions as you're staying with the breath, as how to get settled in with the breath, and how to deal with other thoughts that come up. But as long as you've established your priorities clearly, then the mind will feel more at ease. You'll be at ease to think about the breath, evaluate the breath, make the most of whatever sense of well-being you can develop through the breath.

The fact that all those activities are centered around one thing gives the mind a greater sense of security. Ajaan Lee gives the image of holding on to a post or a pole and running around. Even though you're running around in circles, you don't get dizzy, because you're holding on to something solid, something that doesn't change. But if you go out into the middle of a yard and spin around just three times, you tend to get dizzy and fall down.

So you've got one theme you're going to stick with right now. That's how you take advantage of the fact that the mind is an active principle. It's always doing.

What the mind is, the Buddha doesn't say. When he talks about the aggregates he doesn't define them as things—they're activities. In fact, there's so much of the Dhamma that you can understand by seeing things as activities—and that's how we find release.

As long as we're living in the world of solid things—this is this, and that's that—then those ideas take on a lot of reality. And we find ourselves trapped by them. That's why the Buddha says that we're assailed by the categories of objectification. Once you have an "I am" and you identify yourself as "I am this," then the "this" has to live in a world, and the world gets defined. Then we find other beings defining themselves and defining their worlds, and of course there's

going to be conflict where our worlds overlap.

The way to get out of that is to think in terms that don't pin things down as things, but to see them as activities. Learn to see your sense of self as an action— something you choose to do, something you can change, because you can change your actions. The same with the world, your views about the world: They're based on your actions going through the world, and you've made some generalizations based on them. But you can turn around and look at how these ideas get formed, and you see that they're actions. That makes it a lot easier to let go of some ideas about yourself and about the world, and not feel threatened. You realize that they were put together to begin with, and they might not have been put together so well.

Like even the word *dhamma* can also mean act. As the Buddha said, the way you learn the Dhamma is to commit yourself to a course of action, and then you reflect on it. Which is why he doesn't put so much emphasis on defining things: What is your consciousness? What is your mind? Who are you? Those are questions the Buddha leaves aside, or else he defines them in terms of verbs—your knowing is a doing.

Sometimes you sense consciousness as this field that's always there, but it, too, is a construct—it's put together. And we're the ones putting it together. Who are we? The Buddha doesn't say, but look at the activities. Try to center everything you know around the principal of karma. What are you *doing*, and is it skillful or not? When you can think in these terms, it's a lot easier to let go of the things you've created in the past.

Look at how the Buddha has you deal with clingings: We tend to cling to sensuality, cling to habits and practices, cling to views, cling to ideas about ourselves. What is sensuality? It's the mind's fascination with thinking about, planning about, reflecting on sensual pleasures. So sensuality is an action. Your views: Largely, this refers to your views about the world. Those, too, are constructs, or at least, he has you look at them as constructs. Your idea of a self is an activity. So, he's trying to reduce all your clingings to habits and practices.

You see that you have a habitual way of thinking about the world, a habitual way of thinking about yourself, a habitual way of looking for pleasure in sensuality, and that reduces everything to kamma. And there are better habits—the habits of the noble eightfold path, which are things you do. You develop the habits of right action, right speech, right livelihood, the practice of jhana, the practice of discernment. You commit yourself to these things, and then you watch your actions. This is how the Dhamma is known.

I've told you the story of the scholar who complained one time that he couldn't

understand what happened to the Buddha on the night of his passing away. The night of his awakening, he could understand. As he saw it, it was just a moment of great equanimity. But passing away, what happened there, he had no idea. It didn't make any sense. The idea that the Buddha would have passed away into something unconditioned made no sense to him, because he said, "After all, human beings are conditioned realities. We're biological creatures."

So I had a conversation with him, and I pointed out to him that the Buddha said that if you start out by defining yourself, you limit yourself. From that, there are certain things you decide that you can or cannot do because that's what you *are*. Whereas if you put that definition aside and look at what you can do that's skillful, that's harmless—and this principal of harmlessness gets more and more refined as you get into the meditation—then you find you can know some things you wouldn't have imaged otherwise.

So, instead of starting out with what you are and then deciding what you can know based on what you are, the Buddha looked at: What can you know based on your actions? Then look at your sense of what you are, and it begins to dissolve away into other actions. That makes it a lot easier to gain true freedom. Because as the Buddha said, what he taught was kamma that leads to the end of kamma.

The noble eightfold path is a path of action. Right view teaches you to look at everything in terms of actions, because then you can watch yourself act and see that certain actions are skillful, others are not. You can let go of the ones that are clearly unskillful. Then, as you get more and more refined in your sensitivity, you begin to see that things you thought were skillful before are not quite so skillful after all. You can let them go too.

Things get pared away, pared away like this: commitment—reflection, commitment—reflection, all the way to the point where the mind realizes that if it stays in place, the answer to that question, "What to do next? What to do next?" would be: If you stay in place, there's going to be stress. If you move, there's going to be stress. Is there an alternative?

As long as you're still perceiving yourself, even in a subtle level, as something inside the coordinates of space and time, there won't be an alternative. But if you can realize, even that idea of yourself in those coordinates is an action—you can learn how to let it go. Then you can open up to something that's unconditioned, that has no actions, no ostinato, at all.

This is why Ajaan Mun says that nibbāna lies outside of the four noble truths. Some people will say nibbāna is the third noble truth. The Buddha defines the third truth as the *realization* of nibbāna, but after realization, nibbāna itself has no duties. The realization, of course, is to be

realized, but nibbāna itself has no duties, no activities at all. It was the Buddha's genius to realize that we can, through our actions, find this thing that lies beyond action. But it's not a thing, he says. The closest he gets to describing it is as a state, an element, a dimension.

So that's where all this is going. And we find it by trying to find good answers to that question: "What next, what next, what do I do next?" You try to give your best answer, and then act on it, and then reflect—and then adjust your next actions based on that.

That, as the Buddha said, is how the Dhamma is found—not through trying to define things, or pin things down as to: "This has to be this, and that has to be that. Is my consciousness now the same consciousness it's going to be in my next lifetime? When beings enter nibbāna do they all become one, do they not become one? What happens?" Those questions are based on turning actions into things.

So try to get back to just seeing things as actions. What you *are* is a doing. *Knowing* is a doing. When you get really good at seeing these things in these terms, that's how you get free.