

Tap, Tap, Tap

September 8, 2021

When they built the chedi at Wat Dhammasathit, they first had to blast some rock at the top of the hill. So they brought in two guys to do the blasting. The guys came with their dynamite and with a stake and a hammer, and they started hammering away at the stake on the rock very lightly—tap, tap, tap, tap, tap. Then they turned the stake a little bit—tap, tap, tap again—and then turned it again—tap.

I thought to myself, “This is never going to get anywhere.” Well, I came back an hour later and they were almost a foot into the rock; two hours later, they had the hole deep enough that they could stick the dynamite in and blow the rock out.

It was a good lesson in patience—in being very careful and very precise about what you’re doing. They didn’t hit the rock very hard. If they’d hit it very hard, they would have worn themselves out very quickly. But they were able to make something out of a steady, continuous effort by being very precise.

It’s a good lesson for meditation. We see our defilements and we want to get rid of them fast. But it doesn’t work that way, because when we’re getting rid of them fast, we’re running around. This breath comes in, that breath goes out, but the mind is run down to the end of the hour, come back again, back to the end of the hour, come back again, many times—no wonder it gets tired. It hasn’t seen what it’s doing.

Remember: The focus here is, “What are you doing?” After all, the defilements are things that you do. The fabrications of the mind are things that you do. It’s not that they don’t have any reality. They do have a reality—after all, they have their influence—but you have to see where you’re putting effort into something that’s not paying off, and all too often we don’t even see the effort we put into these things. They just seem to be a given. That’s because we’re not looking precisely enough.

Ajaan Fuang had a student one time who tended to have visions in her meditation, so he had her do an exercise in visualization: He had her pull all of her hair out in the vision and then plant it again. The first time she tried it, she planted it within a few minutes. He said to her, “How can you plant things like that in so short a time? It takes a long time to replant your head.” So he told her she had to plant the hair back one hair at a time—to get that precise in her visualization. The purpose of that was to teach her that habit of precision.

Think of the Buddha on the night of his awakening. In the second knowledge of the night, he saw how beings died and passed away and then were reborn in line with their kamma. As he later said, he wasn't the first to have seen this, but he saw it in a lot more detail than anybody else—partly because he saw so many more lifetimes, but partly because he looked carefully at what the actions were.

Because, he said, there are some cases where a person will do good in this lifetime and go to heaven the next lifetime; other cases where a person does good in this lifetime but will go to hell next time around. Similarly, there are people who break the precepts, develop wrong view, and then go to hell the next time; but other people break the precepts, develop wrong view, and then go to heaven the next time around.

Now, some people, seeing just one or two of those cases, could come to some pretty quick conclusions. Those who saw the people doing good going to heaven, people doing evil going to hell would say, "It's absolutely determined: What you do in this lifetime will determine the next lifetime. There's no getting out of it."

Other people, who saw those doing good in this lifetime going to hell and those doing evil in this lifetime going to heaven, would say, "There's no relationship between your actions and your fate in the next life at all."

That's because neither group looked carefully. As the Buddha said, he saw that the people who had done evil but went to heaven had some good actions further back in their kammic history, or, after the bad action, they had developed right view, developed good qualities in the mind; and similarly with the opposite case. And even in cases where someone has done good and gone to heaven, that person had to have other good actions too, either before or after. Those who go to hell from doing a particular action had to have other bad actions before or after.

By looking more carefully, the Buddha saw the complexity of kamma. But he also saw that it wasn't totally determined. Even in the cases where those actions had the expected results, he saw that there was more going on—that, in reaping the results, it was not only a matter of what you had done, but also a matter of your state of mind when the results ripen, which means that we have some freedom here to practice. Without that freedom of choice, the path of practice wouldn't be possible. The idea of a path of practice wouldn't make any sense at all. He saw all this because he looked carefully.

The other reason why others hadn't looked so carefully was because they may have been asking the wrong questions. As the Buddha pointed out in *Majjhima 2*, there are lots of questions that you could ask that are inappropriate and they're not even worth your attention. When you look at them, you can see that many of them are the kinds of questions you would be tempted to ask if you had

knowledge of this sort: “What was I in the past? What will I be in the future? What am I now?” Instead of focusing on the actions, you start focusing on your identity—who you are as a *being*.

But apparently he reasoned that the real factor determining things was not who you are, or what you are, or whether you exist or don’t exist—the real issue is action and its results. So he didn’t let himself get waylaid by thoughts of what we would call metaphysics—the existence of beings and things; he focused solely on actions. As a result, was able to see the patterns by which these actions played themselves out, and also the possibility of going beyond them. It’s because he looked carefully that he saw that possibility—he looked carefully and he asked the right questions.

So that should be a lesson for us as we meditate. The things we need to know are happening right in front of us all the time—right here in the mind, right in the present moment. As he pointed out, everything you need to know is apparent—it’s showing itself—and yet we think these things are hiding. The real reason we don’t see them is because we’re not looking carefully enough.

Sometimes they’re very quick. One thought can shade into another very quickly and you can confuse the two. But if you look carefully, you see that they really are distinct. Right here you begin to sort out which parts of the mind really are skillful, which ones look skillful but actually are not, and vice versa.

And then you remind yourself: You’re *doing* these things. It’s not that they’re happening on their own. So you have to look and see, “Where’s the intention? How do I filter these things? How do I decide what to focus on, what not to focus on?” That’s the kind of thing you can watch directly.

Our knowledge of the world outside is very uncertain. We take educated guesses, we gamble on which sources of information are reliable, which ones are not. But one thing we should know directly is what we’re doing with our sensory input—what we’re doing with the thoughts of the mind in particular—and yet that’s such a huge area of ignorance. It’s a basic principle that the things you know best are the things you do. But here we are, doing these things and not even knowing we’re doing them, because we’re not looking carefully. It’s a wonder that we know anything at all.

So, think of the men with their stake and the hammer—tap, tap, tap. Think of the woman replanting the hair in her head, one strand of hair at a time. Try to develop that same sort of precision in your powers of observation and in your patience. It doesn’t require that you sweat the work, but it does require that you learn how to be consistent and careful. And, doing this, maybe you can blow up some of the rocks in your own head, too.