

Beyond Likes & Dislikes

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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One of Ajaan Mun's favorite topics for a Dhamma talk was the theme of practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma – in other words, in accordance with what the Dhamma demands, not in accordance with what our likes and dislikes demand.

As the Dhamma comes to the West this is probably one of the hardest things for Westerners to appreciate. Everywhere you look, the Dhamma is being remade, recast, so that people will like it. Things that people don't like are quietly cut away; and if things that people like are missing, they're added on. And so the creature that comes out is like the old cartoon of a committee designing a bird: The bird looks pretty good to begin with, but then after the committee's done with it, it looks like an ostrich with no legs. It can't walk and it can't fly, but it sells. In this country of ours, where democracy and the marketplace are all-powerful, the question of what sells determines what's Dhamma, even if it can't walk or fly. And who loses out? We lose out. The Dhamma doesn't lose out; it's always what it is. But we like to add a little here, take away a little there, and as a result we end up with nothing but things we already like and already dislike.

The Buddha pointed out the four ways that people get led off course. Two of them are following your likes and dislikes; the other two are giving in to delusion and fear. These things pull people off the path. We go wandering into the underbrush and then off to who-knows-where simply because we like to follow what we like and to avoid what we dislike – even though the things we dislike are often the things we've got to really look at carefully. Why do we have such a dislike for them? And as for the things that we like, why do we like them? Exactly what do they do for us?

It's easy to doubt other people. It's easy to doubt the teachings. But for some reason we find it very hard to doubt our defilements – all these convictions and preconceived notions we're unwilling to give up. Only when we're willing to put them aside and open ourselves to the possibility, "Okay, maybe they're wrong," can we open ourselves to the Dhamma.

What this comes down to is respect. The Buddha says that the reason we're suffering is because of the craving in our minds, and yet we like to hold on to our craving. We're attached to it. Of all the things we're attached to in life, that's probably the hardest thing to let go: our attachment to our cravings. And it's precisely here that the Buddha says, "That's the problem."

So it's a question of how much we're willing to suffer before we say, "Maybe he's right," and give some respect to his teachings – to take our respect for our likes and our dislikes, our preconceived notions of what's right and wrong, what's good and bad, to put them aside for the time being and give some respect to what the Buddha has to say. For all of us this is very hard. It's not hard just for Americans. It's hard for everybody. But given our culture these days, it seems especially hard for us, so we have to be especially careful about this issue – of taking only what we like and avoiding what we dislike in the practice.

What do we miss out on when we do that, given that so much of the practice goes against the grain? We like to create little worlds for ourselves – this is called the effluent of becoming that comes fermenting up in the mind – and we're really good at it. We can create all kinds of worlds: beautiful worlds, ugly worlds, delightful worlds, horrible worlds. The movies that play in the theatres are nothing compared to the productions we can create in our minds over and over and over again. We're really good at it. We get our entertainment that way. It's a game we like to play.

There are two parts of the mind: the part that likes to fool itself and the part that likes to be fooled. It's like little kids playing together. "Okay, I'll be the doctor, you be the patient," or, "I'll be the doctor, you be the nurse," or whatever. The two parts of the mind say, "Okay, let's play along," and then they dive into the make-believe. This is something we do so well, day after day after day.

When we come to the practice, we want it to be another fun thing to do, we want to be entertained, so when we're told to deconstruct these things it's very difficult. We're very good at putting together, at creating these worlds, but deliberately stepping out of them is hard. It's only when we begin to realize that the more we keep creating these trains of thought that we love to follow backwards and forwards, the more we create suffering for ourselves. That's when we begin to wonder: Maybe there's a way out; maybe there's something better.

The Buddha has a teaching on what's called transcendent dependent co-arising. It starts with the regular chain of dependent co-arising up to suffering and then adds, "But based on suffering comes conviction." At some point you have to suffer enough to say, "There must be a way out." And you're going to look for that way out. You're serious about it this time. You're willing to make whatever sacrifices are needed, even if it means sacrificing your pride, sacrificing your attachment to your craving, sacrificing all these little worlds you create for yourself to fill up the day. You want to see through that process.

It's not easy, but the results are more than you can imagine, better than you can imagine. Up to now you've been living in imaginary worlds, and look at where they've gotten you: not all that far. But if you learn to step outside them, you find that things are much wider open than you could have imagined. Even after just the first stages, when the mind settles down into states of concentration, you find that whatever presents itself as an object of discussion or elaboration of

the mind, you can just say, “No, no, no, not interested.” You can shoot it down, shoot it down, zap it out of your range of awareness. This yields a great sense of spaciousness. Even on just this level you begin to realize about this process we’ve been following for so long: “Maybe the Buddha’s right; maybe there is a way out.”

Every now and then we chant about having respect for concentration. Learn how to have respect for that quiet spot in the mind, the spot that’s not creating any interesting ideas, not creating any interesting conversation. It’s just a very quiet, still spot in the mind that hasn’t yet settled down anywhere. Allow it to settle down on the breath, and just stay right there. Catch it if it seems to be moving off in any other direction. Bring it back. Learn how to freeze the mind at that spot. In other words, as soon as it seems to move to pick up something, just stop it, stop it, stop it, and then allow it to relax in that stopped position, and stay there. The mind may complain, “Well, there’s nothing interesting going on here; this is pretty dumb.” Okay, just let it complain, but don’t listen to it. After a while, as you train yourself to grow comfortable with this quiet spot, you won’t need to freeze yourself there. You find it natural simply to plug into it, for it’s a good place to be.

Learn how to develop this skill – and it really is an important skill – this willingness to give up on your normal inner conversations and try something really new. It requires some imagination to try it. And it requires a lot of mindfulness and a lot of alertness to stay there because we’re so good at creating little worlds right away, letting these things bubble up and flow out. The problem is they keep bubbling up and flowing out until they overwhelm you in a flood. The word *asava*, or outflows, effluents, fermentations: The list for these – sensuality, becoming, views, and ignorance – is the same as the list for the *ogha*, or floods, when the things that bubble out are allowed to drown the mind. Learn how to keep your head above water. Learn how to keep these fermentations in check.

If you’re going to create something in the mind, then create this sense of stillness, this sense of centeredness, this sense of expansive awareness. Work at this, because what you’re doing is taking those raw materials, taking your tendencies to create things, and turning them in the right direction. You’re bringing those tendencies in line with the Dhamma, with the Dhamma that points outward. It says, “Look! Freedom lies in this direction.” You’ve tried lots of other things; why don’t you really give this a serious try?