

Hope

January 10, 2004

“Days and nights fly past, fly past. What are you doing right now?”

It’s one of the questions that the Buddha has us ask ourselves each day, each day—both to engender a sense of heedfulness so that we don’t waste our days and nights as they fly past and fly past, and also to point us to the area where work needs to be done: what we’re doing.

Oftentimes we see ourselves as the passive recipients of experiences: things come in the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body; thoughts come into the mind. And we tend to miss how much we’re doing right now to turn those experiences into suffering.

The early Buddhists said that this point was the one where the Buddha’s teaching differed most radically from everything else that was available at the time: pointing to what you’re doing right now and the effects that it has right now. And also to the possibility for change. You don’t have to create that suffering for yourself.

But first you have to see yourself doing it. Otherwise, it simply seems to be a part of what you’re receiving. Actually, a lot of what we experience in the present moment is what we’re doing right now. And yet we see it as something happening to us. As a result, we don’t see the opportunity for change.

So when you look at experience, try to see that element of what you’re doing. Of course, to see yourself doing it, you have to be very quiet. That’s why we meditate, that’s why we try to get the mind to settle down and be still—so that you can watch what you’re doing.

Then you begin to notice that in all the aggregates, the five classes of things that we use to make up our sense of self: There’s a lot of *doing* in each of them. The sensations in your body come in but you create them into a form. The potentials for feeling come and you turn them into feelings. The same with perceptions, thought-constructs, even consciousness: All of these things have an element of fabrication. There’s an element of doing, an element of intention in all of these things. And we tend to miss that, which is why we miss the point where we can make a difference.

So always keep that in mind. Your feelings have an element of doing, an element of intention. Your perceptions have an element of intention. That may be harder to see than the intention in your thought-constructs, but it’s there.

So be conscious of how you label things, how you think, how you relate to your feelings. Because all those elements of doing can cause suffering. And when you’re causing suffering for yourself, no wonder the world seems to be a weighty place. You’re already weighing yourself down with all kinds of stuff. Then when other things come in from the outside and it’s like the straw that breaks the camel’s back. It’s just more than you can take. You lash out and then it comes right back at you. The things that you throw out at the world are boomerangs. They

come back at you, which makes you suffer even more.

So that's honestly not the solution. The solution lies in learning how to create fewer burdens for yourself in the way you act, the way you shape the present moment. That's the most effective place to focus your attention, because that's where you really can make a difference.

The nature of the world is that it's inconstant, stressful, not-self. This is just the way it is. No matter how much we'd like to be something else, that's the way it is. But what you *do* doesn't necessarily have to be the way it is. It can change.

So try to get the mind as still as possible so that you can be more precisely aware of what you're doing and the results of what you do. The more quiet you are, the more you can see. The more still you are, the more you can see the little movements of the mind as they run out after things.

Ajaan Lee talks about "currents of the mind." There's your basic awareness and then there are these currents that flow out from the awareness to latch onto objects. If you're riding in the current, you have no idea of how fast it's going because you're in the current. It's when you stand still and the current moves: That's when you see it.

So be as still with the breath as you can. Try to be as sensitive to the breathing as you can. The more sensitive you are, the more you catch the details. This means, one, bringing the mind to the breath, and then two, learning how to keep it there. It's in the learning how to keep it there that you see a lot of the movements of the mind. Because they're going to pull you away.

In the beginning you tend to go with them. But after a while you realize, "Oh, I've strayed away. I was supposed to be here to meditate and I was thinking about yesterday. I was thinking about this person, what this person said, what that person did," rehashing old things.

Or flowing out after the future: thinking about what you're going to do tomorrow when you leave here or what you're going to do next week when you leave here or whatever. And then you come back, "Whoops, I was supposed to be here meditating."

So you establish yourself with the breath again. The trick is to catch yourself as quickly as possible when mind begins to slip off. When you realize that it's slipped off, bring yourself back quickly. Don't tell yourself, "Well, I've slipped off this far; I might as well go all the way." That doesn't accomplish anything. You've got to be true to your meditation.

The more you can stay with the breath, the longer you can stay with the breath, then the more you're going to see, the more you're going to understand. At the same time, the greater sense of well-being there's going to be in the mind. There's every reason to stay here.

Yet there are these little lapses of mindfulness that keep allowing you to go off: Those are the things you've got to watch out for. And it's almost as if the mind knows what it's doing. It kind of blanks out for a minute, then it's gone. It puts up a screen between you and the new thought or between you and what you're doing, so that you can lose your bearings and you're off.

Learn to watch for that. It's one of the mind's old tricks. Make up your mind that you're

going to see through it. Anticipate the fact that it's going to happen. And then keep your eye out for the first signs that the mind's getting ready to go. Ask yourself, "Where are you going?" You're going out, you're going to create trouble, no matter where you go. Even if it's not trouble for other people, it's trouble for yourself.

Thoughts about the past don't provide any real satisfaction. It takes a lot of effort to create them. And you very rarely come back with anything of value. The same when you go traveling off into the future: It takes a lot of energy to create thoughts of the future. And the question is, "What do you get out of it?" You usually come back empty-handed. Or even not empty-handed, you weigh yourself down with all kinds of and rocks.

Like that geologist who was wandering around Grand Tetons in the late 19th century. The Indians saw this man running around with a suitcase in his hand and they wondered what he was doing. He seemed kind of suspicious, going places where white men didn't usually go. So one day they caught him, opened up the suitcase, and found out he had rocks inside. So they let him go, understanding that he was crazy. Of course, he was a geologist.

So—are you a geologist carrying rocks around in your suitcase or are you a crazy person carrying rocks around in your suitcase? In other words, when you're going back to the past are you really learning something useful about the processes of the mind? Or are you just carrying random rocks?

Anticipate the fact that the mind is going to slip off and that it's going to try to disguise that fact from itself. Check to see what the first signs are, so that you can stop yourself in time.

Again, this is a doing. Ignorance isn't a passive process. There's an element of intention in it. We choose to ignore the stress of our thoughts. We choose to ignore the craving that lies behind them.

As we're meditating, we learn to make different choices. We choose now to look into the stress, we choose to look into the craving. But first off we've got to choose to get the mind to settle down in order to see these things. Once it's there, try to keep it there—because the continuity is what makes all the difference.

A lot of the things you're going to discover in the course of the meditation are things that you've had little glimpses of before but you haven't seen the whole picture. Without having seen the whole picture, the glimpses don't mean much of anything. All they mean is the meaning you give to them, which of course comes out of ignorance.

So you've got to try to be as continually with the breath as possible. And once you develop this still center in the present moment, that's when you begin to see. You can catch the movements of the mind and you can start seeing how they create unnecessary suffering for yourself when they label things this way or that.

You can experiment: What's the difference between labeling a pain, "a pain" and then simply labeling it, "a sensation." Or labeling a sound, "This is the sound that so-and-so is making," or simply the fact, "There is a sound." You notice that the mind will behave in different

ways as the labels change. And you have the choice to change them.

Once you see that you have that choice, you begin to realize how much you add to experience. Most of the additions are disturbances. It's very rare that what you add is something that's really useful. But that you have the choice.

We have more choices in life than we like to think. Often we're stuck in a particular way of doing or thinking, and then we like to tell ourselves, "Well, I can't help it. This is the way things are. This is the way I am." But if people couldn't change, there'd be no point in the Buddha's having taught the Dhamma. There'd be no point in our trying to practice the Dhamma. The point is that we *can* change, that the suffering we create for ourselves is unnecessary.

A lot of people don't like to hear this. They like to think that all you do is tell yourself there's nothing more to do, just relax in a sense of spaciousness and that's it. But that doesn't solve things. There really is a lot to be done. When you get a spacious sense, you have to look and be very, very clear about the fact that there may still be some stress in there, still some inconstancy, still some attachment. There's something that still gets in the way of true happiness.

In other words, there's work to be done. And that fact is what gives us hope: the fact that work can create real changes. Effort is not wasted. There is a deathless. It does lie beyond your ability to even imagine it. It's there already, but that doesn't mean you simply relax into it.

As Ajaan Lee says, it's like saltwater. There's freshwater in the saltwater, but that doesn't mean you simply take some saltwater out and put it in a bowl, and the salt will settle out and there you are: freshwater. You've got to distill it. It takes energy, it takes effort.

So that's where our hope lies in applying ourselves to the effort of the practice. And that doesn't just mean the effort that's involved with sitting here with our eyes closed. In every aspect of the practice—in terms of how we deal with other people, how we live together, how we approach our jobs, daily life—there's work to be done to learn how to do these things in ways that create less suffering for ourselves.

The fact that there's work to be done implies hope: There is a possibility for things to be better than they are.

If life were entirely passive, if we were just receivers of experiences, then wisdom would lie in learning to accept things, saying, "This is as good as it gets, we might as well learn how to accept it." But that's not the way it is. The fact is that we're creating experience and we can do a better job.

And the process of action, the process of creation is such that we can arrive at the end of action. That's what the noble path is all about. It's a type of action that takes us to the end of action and delivers us to the door to the deathless.

That's the fact that brings hope. It requires energy, it takes effort, but it does mean an end to suffering. After all, we are the ones creating our experiences right now out of the raw material that comes from our past karma. So that means we can learn to do a better job. The part for

which we're responsible right now can be handled more skillfully. And that's a skill that can be learned.

Without that possibility, things would be hopeless. With that possibility comes responsibility but it also brings hope.