

Questioning & Acceptance

February 22, 2010

Several years back, a book came out in Thai—a collection of sayings from the different forest ajaans, named *Yoniso Manasikara*, which we translate as appropriate attention. This was considered such a distinctive part of the forest teaching that they wanted to name the whole book after that one principle.

The usual Thai translation of *yoniso manasikara* is “finding the appropriate strategy.” It’s a distinctive part of the Buddha’s teachings that you want to be strategic and that you’re here to figure out what’s going to work and what’s not going to work in gaining release. That requires that you question, that you investigate and experiment. This is an aspect of the teaching that tends to get lost, especially with the emphasis we often hear on acceptance and equanimity, that you just accept whatever comes, being passive, patient. Well, it’s important to know where acceptance and patience fit in the practice.

When the Buddha was teaching meditation to his son, Rahula, he started out with the teaching on how to make your mind like earth. In other words, people throw disgusting things on the earth, but the earth doesn’t recoil, it doesn’t experience revulsion. Make your mind like water. People use water to wash away disgusting things, but the water doesn’t get disgusted. The same with fire or wind: Fire burns disgusting things, wind blows disgusting things away, but the fire itself, the wind itself doesn’t get affected by this.

So the Buddha was teaching patience up front as an essential quality you want to bring to the meditation, so that you can sit with unpleasant things long enough to observe and understand them. But he didn’t stop there. After that, he taught Rahula the sixteen steps of breath meditation. And these involve exploring: breathing in long, breathing out long, breathing in short, breathing out short; figuring out how to breathe aware of the whole body; noticing how the fact of the breath bodily fabrication can be brought to stillness, how it can give rise to a sense of rapture, how it can give rise to a sense of pleasure. There’s an active element of exploring aspect in these steps of the meditation.

So it’s not that you just accept things and leave them where they are. You accept the way they act, and then you try to make the most out of how they act. It’s like the ideal scientist who comes to an experiment. He may have a few ideas of how he wants the experiment to turn out, but he has to have the basic patience and equanimity to design the experiment properly and to be honest when the experiment doesn’t work. That’s the only way a scientist is going to learn. If it doesn’t work the way he hoped, he can

accept that fact and then can come back and design the experiment in another way, to see if that works. Or else he can learn something new that he hadn't expected. That's how learning happens. It requires patience and equanimity, but it also requires proactive exploring and questioning. It doesn't come from just sitting there and being passive about the whole thing or simply accepting everything.

Acceptance is basically a cure for neurosis, which is a state of mind where you can't accept things. If you say that the prime reason why we suffer is because we can't accept things for what they are, you're saying that we suffer because we're neurotic. But the Buddha's analysis of suffering was not that we're neurotic. He saw it more as coming from the fact that we're not paying careful enough attention to what we're doing. We're not being skillful enough. We're not asking the right questions.

He broke questions down into four categories: the ones that deserve categorical answers, the ones that deserve to be reanalyzed before you answer them, the ones that require cross-questioning before you answer them, and then the ones that should be put aside, that don't deserve an answer at all.

The categorical questions come down to basically two sorts. The first center on the question of what's skillful and what's unskillful. The second sort are questions framed in terms of the four noble truths. Those are the most categorical of his categorical teachings, the only ones that he actually describes as categorical in the Canon.

So the questions derived from those issues are the ones that you should be applying yourself to. And this is what appropriate attention is all about. You pay attention to these questions. You look into them. You actively try to figure things out in terms of what's skillful and what's not. After all, when you bring the mind to stillness, it's not just the stillness that's going to bring about awakening. You have to pose the right questions in that stillness: That's when awakening can happen.

I was talking last night to someone who was of the impression that insight meant a sudden energy flow in your body and that was it. There are a lot of misunderstandings out there about what insight is. Actually insight is an understanding into cause and effect.

Ajaan Lee gives the example of getting some silver. He says that if you get silver but don't smelt it or try to make it into different things, you don't really know silver. If you know causes without effects, or effects without causes, you don't really know them. You have to see the connection, because it's in the connection that the whole issue of skillfulness arises. You're going to do something and you hope for a certain effect. If you get the effect and it really is good, then you know that the action is skillful. There has to be that relationship between cause and effect for the whole notion of skill to make any sense to begin with.

The four noble truths are also based on a sense of cause and effect. Suffering and stress have a cause that you can trace down and find in the mind. And then you can end suffering by doing what's needed to undercut the cause. But you have to be able to notice cause and effect as they actually happen. It's not simply a matter of going through the motions, or simply believing what the Buddha said. The Buddha says to do x, but if you do x and don't think about it, the results aren't going to come. He himself in the course of his quest for awakening directed his quest through questions. He noticed, "Here I'm doing this this way, and this is not getting good results. How about if I tried that?" He started out looking for happiness in things that aged, grew ill, and died. Then he said, "Wait a minute, I'm subject to these things too, and if I look for happiness on this level I won't have anything to show for all my efforts. What if I tried to look for a different kind of happiness? A happiness that didn't die?" And then he tried various courses of action.

If he found that a particular course didn't work, he tried another one. And part of figuring out what worked was that he would look at the results that he got and say, "Do these really measure up?" That was an important part of the questioning process: looking at the results and seeing, "Is this really an end of suffering? Or is this just a nice way station? Or is this something totally off the track entirely?" It's because he kept his standards high in that process of what he would call cross-questioning himself that he was able to attain awakening.

As he said, it was because of his lack of contentment with skillful qualities that he attained awakening. In other words, he didn't rest content with something nice happening or a nice little opening, or a level of concentration. He asked himself, "Is there still suffering of any kind?" And if there was any suffering, any stress left, he knew that he hadn't found the path that he wanted yet. So he tried something new.

When he then came to teach, he wanted to encourage the same attitude in his students. On the one hand, he would be very open to questions. When he would give his talks, he would almost always frame them as questions and answers. He'd say, for instance, "There are five strengths. Which five?" There was always that question: Which five? How many? What are they? And then he would give you the list in response to the question.

When people came to him with questions, he was open to answering them. As long as he felt that the question was sincere, he was happy to answer. And he would encourage people to ask questions: What does this mean? How should this be understood? How should this be applied? Those were questions he encouraged his listeners to ask.

He said that there were two kinds of teachers: the teachers who encourage cross-questioning and the teachers who teach bombast—the ones who say just nice words

that everybody likes to hear, and they can sort of get a nice buzz, from the words, but without encouraging you to define things clearly enough to put into practice.

That was not the kind of teacher he was. As he he said, with teachers who teach bombast, you end up with people not really understanding anything. They're not clear on the meaning of the words because they're not encouraged to ask.

What this meant was that the Buddha tried to be very clear about his words, what they meant, how they should be applied. And then he gave his students checklists. These are the things you look for in your mind, he would say. If you can't read other people's minds at least learn how to read your own mind. Is there any greed in your mind? Is there any anger? Is there any aversion? Lust? Envy?—a long, long list of possible things that, if you find any of these things, you've got to work on them.

If your meditation wasn't working, he'd encourage you to ask: What's not going right? He gave the analogy of a cook working for a prince. The cook would fix lots of different curries and then notice, "Which kind of curries does the prince reach for? Which does he ask for?" Then, for the next day's meal, he'd fix more of those kinds of curries. As a result, the cook would get a reward. And the Buddha said, in the same way, when you find that your meditation is not going well, you've got to ask: What's going wrong? What's missing? Grill yourself on this.

Because this is the only way you're going to get any reward, any progress in your practice—and the only way you're going to come to an understanding of cause and effect through what works and what doesn't work in the mind.

Even his questions on what are commonly called the three characteristics are actually questions using three perceptions: inconstancy, stress, and not-self. He posed those as a series of questions on what's working and what's not, what's skillful and what's not.

First you develop a strong sense of concentration, and then, when you've mastered enough, you can start investigating it. And the questions apply in this way. You focus, say, on the sense of form here in the concentration: the form of the body, the breath, the earth property, the wind property, the water property. You ask: Is this constant? The states of concentration can seem very constant, but you've got to look very carefully, and you'll see that there is a slight bit of inconstancy. The level of stress, for instance, goes up and down. Then the next question is, If it's inconstant, is it easeful, or stressful? And you really see that the inconstancy involves stress.

Then when he gets to the question about not-self, he doesn't tell you to come to the conclusion that there is or is not a self. That's not what he's asking. He's asking, Is it valid, is it skillful, to claim this as yourself? Are you really going find happiness if you claim this as yourself? That's the basic question he's asking.

It's essentially a question of what's skillful and what's not. When you can see clearly, No, you can let it go. And you go through the feelings and the perceptions and the thought fabrications and the consciousness that's aware of all these things. You examine each of these things in the same way. Even when there seems to be just a very bright, bright awareness, you still have to question it: Is there any inconstancy in this awareness?

And sometimes the concentration can be so strong that you have to look at it for a long time, and be very subtle in your powers of observation before you see the inconstancy. Then again there's the question, is there something easeful, or stressful? If it's stressful, is it valid to say this is me? Or mine? Is this skillful? Is this going to be the way to true happiness? Because after all the happiness you want is something that is not subject to inconstancy or stress.

This is where appropriate attention leads you. It takes you all the way. It encourages the questioning attitude and gives you examples of the right questions to ask. We're not here just to accept. We're not here just to be passive, just patient, just equanimous and leave it at that.

I remember listening one time to a tape of a number of people who had been over staying with one of the ajaans in Thailand. It seemed like all of them had learned those lessons: that it was important to develop patience, it was important to develop equanimity and acceptance, the first steps in the Buddha's teachings to Rahula. But unfortunately the ajaan got so sick that he had to stop teaching, and that was all they got. As far as they were concerned, that seemed to be everything. But you talk to the Thai monks who studied with that ajaan and no, they would tell you that there was a lot more about learning how to question things. Once you've learned the principle of accepting the way things are, the way things happen, then you can explore the way things happen to use it to your advantage, to find whether it's possible to find a happiness that lies just beyond acceptance. Is it possible to find a happiness that has no problems at all? Because acceptance and equanimity often involve having to put up with things that are unpleasant. But equanimity is not nibbana.

The Buddha's very clear on this. He says you can get stuck on equanimity, and that can prevent your gaining awakening. You have to go beyond equanimity and break through to something that really is deathless. You can do that only by questioning, by figuring out what's working and what's not—and having very high standards for evaluating what's working and what's not.

So this is why the way the Buddha questioned things is a really important part of his teaching. It's essential. He found that it was essential in his own quest and he encouraged it among his students. This is why he said, of all the qualities you can

develop inside, all of your inner qualities, nothing is more conducive for awakening than appropriate attention.