

The Value of Effort

February 7, 2014

Those two chants that we chanted just now go well together. On the one hand, “The world is swept away, it does not endure. It offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. It’s a slave to craving.” And then we follow that up with, “May I be happy. May all beings be happy.” The first chant is a statement. This is the way things are. The second chant is a wish, an act of the will. You want to find happiness and you want to find it in a way that allows other beings to be happy too—all other beings. You don’t want to harm anybody. So those two chants together establish the fact that what we’re doing here is working on developing the qualities inside that will find that happiness in the midst of a lot of change and uncertainty outside. There’s work to be done. There are things to be attained.

It’s important to remember that, because there are so many teachings out there that tell you otherwise—that there’s nothing to be attained, there’s no you there anyhow, so just let things arise and pass away, arise and pass away. Just sit there being choiceless and you’ll be okay—just kind of float through things and at the very end, everything just disappears like a bubble bursting innocently in the sunny air. But that kind of thinking negates our desire for true happiness and it negates everything that the Buddha taught. After all, he taught four noble truths. If it was just a matter of letting go, letting go, all we’d need is one noble truth. That noble truth would be, there’s nothing, so any time anything arises and it looks like something, just let it go—and that’s it.

Now, there *are* times when you have to be patient with things arising and passing away, but that’s because you want to learn about them to see *what* arises and what passes away, and what arises and passes away with it. When you’re having trouble figuring things out, you just want to sit there and watch things patiently. Or on days when your mind is totally out of control, you have to be patient to sit through the storm. Find a spot in the body where you can get some shelter, to wait until the storm passes, but recognize that it is a storm and that it’s going to end. In the meantime, you’ve got to look after your well-being.

Still, we do have four noble truths and all the truths have value. That’s why the Buddha said they’re noble. They help give us valuable advice. When there’s stress or suffering, you don’t want to run away from it or push it away. You want to comprehend it. That requires watching it, understanding it, so you can see where it comes from, and what you’re doing in particular that’s contributing to it.

There are, after all, two kinds of stress and suffering. There's the stress of the three characteristics, which just goes with the fact that things arise and pass away. And then there's the stress and suffering that comes from ignorance and craving. That's something you can do something about. That's what the Buddha wants you to comprehend—so that, once you comprehend it, you can see where the cause is and develop dispassion both for the cause and for the suffering, so that you can let go of the cause. In that way, you realize the cessation of suffering. This requires, of course, that you develop the path. The path itself has directions on what things you let go and what things you develop.

So there are lots of different tasks to be done: four main tasks—comprehending, letting go, realizing, and developing—which is why we have four noble truths. They're noble because they're useful in a noble search that leads to a noble attainment. The noble search is a search for a happiness that's deathless, that's totally free from conditions, that doesn't require that you take anything away from anyone else. As you're on the path, and you've still got this body, you're going to have to be eating things. The fact that we're living together, consuming parts of the world: There's a certain burden that we place on one another, and we try and keep it as light as possible, but it's still there, and it's good to think about it. That's why we have the reflection on the requisites, to remind ourselves, even as we try to be unburdensome, that the simple fact that we've got this body is a huge gaping need, or series of needs. We need food; we need clothing; we need shelter; we need medicine. This reflection gives us an extra spur to find a happiness that doesn't require any of these things. And you don't find that happiness simply by saying, "Well, there's nothing to attain, so I just let go, let go."

There will come a point when you let go of everything, but you can't let go of things until you've developed the things that need to be developed and comprehended the things that need to be comprehended. Otherwise, when you tell yourself to let go, the mind surreptitiously turns around and hangs onto something else. Remember this as you face some of the difficulties that come up in the practice—that they really are worth working through; they really are worth battling. This is why the Buddha used the image of the soldiers so many times in his teachings. And why the flavor of a text like the Dhammapada is the heroic flavor, because it takes heroic determination to face down your greed, aversion, and delusion. As you sit here meditating, you could be just allowing whatever comes to come and pass away, pass away, that's it; or you could be actively trying to work on concentration. Nobody's forcing you. The only thing forcing you is that there is suffering; there is stress. And if you hold in mind your conviction in the Buddha's awakening, you've got to be convinced that you can do something about suffering and stress. You can bring them to an end.

That's what the basic conviction in our practice is: that the Buddha really did awaken to something special. There's something special out there. Why not go for it? There's something special in here. Why not go for it? You read the great ajaans talking about how amazing the Dhamma is when you come across it. Ajaan MahaBoowa has a fine passage where he says that if you could actually take nibbana out and show it to everybody, nobody would want anything else. That's what everybody would go for. But it's not something that can be shown that way. When we haven't seen or tasted it for ourselves yet, it's just news, a possibility. But when you think about how reliable the Buddha was and how reliable all the noble disciples were, it's a possibility you want to take seriously.

This is why one of the idioms they have in Thai for the practice is "making an effort." You really are trying to abandon things that you like but you know are going to be destructive in the long term. And you're trying to develop things that may be hard but you know will be good in the long term. That requires motivation. It requires a healthy sense of self.

I was reading a sad piece a while back where someone, a monk actually, was saying that the idea that we need to attain something in the practice requires motivation, and motivation requires a sense of self, so therefore, it's against the Buddha's teachings to think that you're going to go anywhere or attain anything. Now, the Buddha talks again and again about a skillful of self that you've got to use in the practice so that you can motivate yourself. Without that, why bother doing anything at all? So here we're going back to learn how to relate to our sense—or senses—of self in a mature way, and for a lot of us, that's quite a stretch, but it's an important lesson to learn. A lot of times the type of meditation where you're just told to allow whatever's going to come up to come up and don't try to create anything out of it: That's for short periods of time, so you don't put too much pressure on yourself.

But when you think of the practice as a lifelong practice, there's got to be a goal. There's got to be a purpose. And we have to learn how to relate to it in an intelligent way, so that we don't get all frustrated by the fact that we're not there yet. You learn the patience and you learn how to enjoy the path while you're on it. This is why there's so much emphasis on developing a sense of ease and well-being as you focus on the breath; and on allowing that ease and well-being to spread throughout the body—pervade, suffuse, permeate every part of the body—every little cell. Give the body and mind some nourishment. Settle in and, as the Buddha says, indulge in that sense of well-being, but don't wallow in it so much that you lose touch with the breath. Stay here with the breath and allow the well-being to nourish you: in all the little cells, all the nerves, every little part of the body.

Make this a path that you enjoy being on, so that when we talk about right effort it's not just stressing yourself out and straining. It's the effort

to give rise to something really good here in the present moment and to learn how to care for it, tend to it, look after it. Don't drop it easily. Then, as you focus in here, you find that what you're looking for is also in here as well. Try not to have one eye on the path and another eye on the goal, because that way your attention is split. Give all your attention to what you're doing right now.

This is another aspect of the Buddha's teachings. He says that what you're doing has value. What you're doing is important. The idea of just letting things arise and pass away denies value to your actions. So the choices you make are important.

We're practicing choice-full awareness. Value those choices. Give them importance, because they do shape your life. They already have an importance in and of themselves. What you've got to do is take that importance and use it toward a really worthwhile goal, a noble goal. As Ajaan Suwat noted several times, the Buddha talks about contemplating things as being not-self, but he never applies that to your actions. He never says that kamma is not-self. He says our kamma is ours. There *will* come a point when you go beyond kamma, but as long as you're making kamma, do it well. Appreciate the value it has in being able to lead you to happiness in this life and a happiness that goes beyond this life. The more value you give to it, the more things of worth you can experience as a result.