

All Dhamma, All the Time

October 28, 2013

The Rains Retreat is over, kathina has been spread, and now a lot of us are going to be going our separate ways. During the retreat, we've depended on the good example of others around us to help us with the practice. As you go your own way, you've got to be able to take that environment, take that sense of support, inside you. You have to learn to be, as the Buddha said, your own island.

And how do you become your own island? You make the Dhamma your island. There's an academic writer I was reading a while back saying that the Buddha probably didn't want people to take refuge in him, or the Dhamma or the Sangha, just take refuge in themselves. He simply tolerated it when people took refuge in the Triple Gem—that was the academic's idea.

But the Buddha said over and over again that you've got to take the Dhamma as your refuge. That's what it means to make yourself your refuge. In other words, you internalize the Dhamma. The good examples you've seen around you are for you to internalize. The bad examples you've seen around you are for you to take as lessons: "This is what happens to people who don't practice well, or this is what they look like from the outside." You have to remind yourself, "That's probably what I look from the outside, too, if I have those qualities. What can I do to change those?"

This is called, *opānāyiko*, bringing things inward, making them pertinent to what's actually going on in your mind. You can hear the Dhamma night after night after night, and sometimes it's just water off a duck's back. It doesn't penetrate. But then maybe one or two little pieces will hit. Of course, the Dhamma is not to be found just in the words. You see things around you, you see people's behavior. You notice cause and effect in their behavior.

There's that famous interchange that Ajaan Mun had with Somdet Mahawirawong, a scholarly monk way up in the ecclesiastical hierarchy in Bangkok who didn't have much use for the forest tradition. His teacher, Chao Khun Upali, had been a very close friend of Ajaan Mun's and respected Ajaan Mun a lot, but the student had never really picked up on that respect. Sometimes, he said, he didn't understand a word Ajaan Mun would say in his Dhamma talks. That's probably because it didn't fit in with his ideas of what Dhamma should be.

He challenged Ajaan Mun one time saying, "Here I am, living in Bangkok with all these famous Dhamma teachers around, and even then I find problems that come up in my own life that I can't solve and they can't solve. Where do you hear the Dhamma out here in the woods?" And Ajaan Mun said, "I hear the Dhamma twenty-four hours a day, except when I'm asleep. Every time a leaf falls, every time a bird calls, there's Dhamma." The monk was taken aback and finally said, "Well, it shows you know how to listen."

That's what you've got to be as a Dhamma practitioner: a good listener. Listen with

your eyes, listen with your ears, and your nose, and your tongue, and your body, and your mind, to what's happening in terms of cause and effect.

And remember to develop mindfulness. Mindfulness is not just being aware of what's happening and saying, "Oh, that's interesting," and letting it pass, pass, pass. It means remembering: remembering what's skillful, remembering what's not, remembering the lessons you've learned. It helps to keep the mind still in order to be able to remember. Because if you're running around, not paying attention to things, or running around paying attention to things to the exclusion of what's actually going on, you're not going to be able to remember what happened because you saw it just in passing—if you saw it at all.

So you make the mind still. That's the first condition for listening. When you want to listen for a far-distant sound, you try to make yourself as quiet as possible. It's the same here, listening for the Dhamma all the time. It's there. It's like all the radio waves going through the air, the TV waves and whatever else is going through us right now. They're broadcasting all the time, they're going through our very atoms all the time. It's simply a question of knowing how to tune in, getting the right apparatus so you can tune in to the right frequency. Here you want to tune in to the Dhamma frequency, which is basically the question, "Where is there stress here? What can I do to put an end to it?" Those are the questions you always want to bring to your listening.

This is the other quality you want to bring with you in addition to mindfulness: the ability to phrase things in terms of the right questions. The Buddha placed a huge emphasis on this. If you don't question things, you don't notice anything. How many centuries did they think, "Why do things fall to the Earth?" and the answer always was, "Because it was their nature to fall." And it was just accepted—until Newton came along and started questioning that, saying, "What does that mean it's their nature to fall? Maybe the Earth moves up, too. Maybe it's the nature of matter that it attracts matter." It was by asking that question that Newton learned a lot of new things that became very, very useful. Without any questioning, nothing would have been learned. We wouldn't have had all the benefits that come from the knowledge of gravity and the knowledge of the laws of motion. It happened because someone questioned something that everybody else accepted.

Here you want to learn how to question your own mind, and in particular, the things you've always accepted about your thoughts. When you think in a certain way, you have to question yourself: "Is this really the right way to think? What happens as a result? Have I ever noticed what the result of my thinking is?"

All too often, we get so involved in our thought-worlds and so involved in our set of values that we don't see the impact they have around us. I was reading an article a while back about the computer and software revolution. Ground Zero is up there in Silicon Valley. And they talk about creating a whole new world where everything is going to be wonderful and all this information is going to be right at our fingertips. So one writer went to Silicon Valley and said, "Okay, what is it *like* right around the areas where these people live?" Poor people are getting pushed off to the side, and corporations are not paying their taxes. All kinds of things are going on on the side that nobody notices because they're all

too wound up in all the wonderful things they think they are doing.

Well, this is a good metaphor for the way we all are. In a sense, we have our plans, “This should be like that, that should be like this,” But wait a minute: What are you doing? What are the side-effects of your thoughts, what are the side-effects of your actions, of your words? Where’s the stress? What’s causing the stress? You have to keep looking in, in, in.

So those are the questions you want to bring. Keep looking back on your own behavior. “Where is there something that can be improved? Where am I still sloppy?” Because it’s in our sloppiness that we tend to slough over things. We speak in certain ways and act in certain ways and think in certain ways: “Well, everybody else does it, it must be okay.” Well, no. Everybody else is out there swimming around in samsara all the time.

You really have to sort things out: “Okay, which are the old habits I’ve learned that are good, and which ones are not good?” The system of the Buddha’s questions is what helps point you in the right direction—that, and your willingness to keep asking those questions of yourself.

So it’s in this way that you listen to the Dhamma, wherever you are, whether in good surroundings or uncondusive surroundings. The Dhamma is always still there. The lessons may be different but there *are* lessons. And if you know how to listen, you’ll hear them.

Then, as the Buddha said, after listening, you take it and you think it over, you weigh things. That means weighing what you’re doing against what you know of the Dhamma, weighing what you’ve noticed in your actions against what you know of the Dhamma and figuring out what needs to be done.

This is when you can learn to be self-reliant and have yourself as an island. Because your trying to turn yourself into one big hunk of Dhamma: all your attitudes, all your actions. This is how you learn how to depend on yourself: You take the virtues of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, and you bring them in.

And you do that by imitating the Buddha. He was the sort of person who questioned himself all the time. As a young prince, he noticed he was suffering. He didn’t blame his father, he didn’t blame his mother, he didn’t blame the surroundings. He realized, “I’m looking for happiness in the wrong place. What if I were to look in another place?” That set the pattern for his entire quest. He’d run up against a wall. “Okay, what am I doing wrong?” That was always the question, “What am *I* doing wrong? What other way could I act? What other way could I think?” And it was in asking those questions, using his ingenuity to come up with answers and then testing the answers against that series of questions about stress and the ending of stress: That’s how he came up with the right answers. That’s why he focused his teaching on stress and the ending of stress, because that’s the framework that helps sort everything out.

That’s the frequency of the Dhamma. Try to tune in to it as much as you can, as consistently as you can.