

The Practice is Wherever There's Mindfulness

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I once read a book by a sociologist who was doing a study comparing a Western insight meditation center with a Thai American temple. At one point, she commented to one of the people at the center that she was surprised at how the people at the Thai temple didn't practice much. They were there for being generous and being virtuous, but they didn't sit and meditate very much. And fortunately, the person she was talking to said, "Well, wait a minute. Maybe generosity and virtue are their practice."

In other words, practice isn't just a matter of sitting with your eyes closed or doing walking meditation. It's something you can do all the time. As Ajaan Maha Boowa once said, "Wherever there's mindfulness, there's the practice," which means that you could be sitting here right now and not really practicing because you're not being mindful. At the same time, you could be out doing other things, engaged with other people, but if you're mindful, you are practicing.

Now, this could lead to some misunderstandings. I know of one case in particular, a person who studied briefly with Ajaan Maha Boowa and came back to the States to lead retreats. One day, people on a retreat were complaining about the idea of doing body contemplation for fear that after a week of doing body contemplation, they'd go back to their partners and wouldn't be able to have a relationship. And he told them, "Well, remember what the Buddha said, that whatever you do, do it mindfully," which, given the context, was not the right thing to say. Mindfulness isn't just being aware of the present moment or having bare awareness, bare attention, or non-reactive awareness of whatever you're doing, willy-nilly. Being non-reactive is not necessarily part of the practice, not always the practice. Sometimes you have to respond, and your awareness has to be very directed toward what the skillful response might be.

In fact, that's what mindfulness is: directed awareness. Mindfulness is keeping something in mind. Like right now as you're meditating, you're keeping the breath in mind. You're keeping your meditation word in mind—if you're using a meditation word—remembering not to wander off; remembering also, if you wander off, to come back.

You can also remember what ways have worked in the past to get the mind to settle down, so that if you come up against an obstacle, you can work your way around it. This involves three qualities: mindfulness, alertness and ardency. Each of them has to be right.

Mindfulness, if it's right, is remembering, basically, what's skillful and what's not skillful. You learn this from what you've heard or read or discovered on your own. You're remembering also that you want to abandon what's unskillful and to develop what's skillful.

As for alertness, it's not just being aware of what's going on in the present moment. For it to be right alertness, it has to be focused on what you're doing and the results coming from

what you're doing. And finally, right ardency means you're trying to do this well, with your whole heart. This is your main focus.

So the ability to keep in mind what's skillful and unskillful, and to notice whether you're actually doing it or not, and if you're not doing it, making the effort so that you can do it and, if you *are* doing it, making the effort to keep doing it: All of this counts as the practice. It's something you can do anywhere. You could be talking with other people. In fact, this is a really good way to practice: Keep asking yourself, "What would be the skillful thing to say now?" And then go ahead and do what that skillful thing would be.

That's the question you should always bring to the present moment: What's the skillful action here? What's the skillful action now? And "action" here, of course, means not just physical actions, but also your words and your thoughts. Once you've framed these questions, see what answers comes up. And then try them out. This is where you perfect and develop your skill, where you get practice in being skillful, by noticing, when you carry through with what you thought was skillful, what are the results? If they're as good as you thought they'd be, okay, remember that. If they aren't, remember that too, and try to figure out a way to do better next time. This is what Ajaan Maha Boowa means when he says, "Where there's mindfulness, there's the practice": all of these things together.

Basically, what you have here is a combination of two of the five strengths: persistence and mindfulness. The two of them together form the practice. They're fed by conviction. That's what keeps you going, because there are lots of times when the skillful thing is one thing and what you would like to do is something else—or the skillful thing seems like it's hopeless. In other words, you know that no matter what you do, things are going to go poorly in this particular situation, and you might feel inclined just to give up on trying to do the skillful thing. Or when you're sick, or when you're getting old, or when you're facing death, you might say, "Well, who cares?" You've got to learn how to get past that. You've got to care.

There's a great French phrase, which translated means, "You don't need hope in order to undertake something good. And you don't need success in order to stick with it." What you need, of course, is conviction. And conviction here means convinced that the Buddha really did gain awakening. You're convinced not only that he gained awakening, but that the implications of his awakening have a direct bearing on what you're doing and saying and thinking right now. Because after all, how did he gain awakening? It was through his actions.

And what did he awaken to? The three knowledges: knowledge of his previous lifetimes, knowledge of how all beings in the universe die and are reborn in line with their kamma, and then finally, what kind of action takes us beyond birth, aging, illness, and death entirely. These knowledges, too, were the result of his own actions. The Buddha was able to *do* this and, as he said, it was because of qualities that we, too, can all develop to reach the same awakening as well.

But even well before we're on the verge of awakening, his awakening has a direct bearing on what we're doing at any one moment. To begin with, the whole issue of rebirth: If you're reaching the end of your life and you feel your life is going to end in nothingness, you're going to be less and less inclined to make any kind of effort at all.

And even right now, the question always comes up: What I'm thinking of doing, is it worth the effort? When you make an effort to do something that you think might be skillful but you know is going to be difficult or just go against what your defilements are saying, the point that will make all the difference is just that question: Is it worth the effort? And the Buddha's awakening basically says Yes, it's always worth the effort.

I was reading recently someone saying that now with our modern world view, the whole question of whether people survive death is totally irrelevant. You don't even have to ask the question. It's not worth answering. However, I can imagine only one situation in which it would not be worth asking and answering: in a world where nobody's doing any actions, where actions are not a gamble, where actions are not difficult. If everything were easy, if you could just slip along without making any choices or having to overcome any difficulties, then the question of what happens as a result of your actions would be irrelevant.

But here we are in this world, where your actions have results. The question is, how long do those results last and how strong can they be? And the Buddha's answer is, in line with his second knowledge, that things you do now can have a long impact, not only in this lifetime, or in the next one, but also in lifetimes after that. And they can be very strong. So even in situations where it's really difficult—you're faced with starvation, you're faced with collapse of society—you'd still be able to say to yourself, "I'll do the skillful thing," and stick with it because you know that the results of the actions you do will last beyond the collapse of society or last beyond starvation. That gives you the strength to keep up the practice, regardless.

As for the third knowledge, as the Buddha said, it comes down to seeing how the mind is creating unnecessary suffering for itself and realizing that you don't have to do that. What this means is that when you find yourself suffering, you always have to look back: "Okay, what am I doing? What assumptions am I bringing to this situation that are making me suffer right now?" And realize that those assumptions are not necessary—that there is always something skillful you can do to stop the unnecessary suffering. There's a skillful way you could think right now so that the mind wouldn't be burdening itself.

So you look into where there's the craving, where there's the clinging, and what could be giving rise to that craving and clinging—what kind of clinging it might be. Are you clinging to sensual fantasies? Are you clinging to old habits and practices? Are you clinging to views that are causing you to suffer? Are you clinging to an idea of yourself that's causing you to suffer? These are things you can change. And making the effort to change them: That's the practice.

This all comes under Ajaan Maha Boowa's statement that wherever there's mindfulness, there's the practice, because mindfulness enables us to keep the Buddha's awakening in mind.

His awakening is not just one random event in human history. It's an event that reorders everything. The tradition says that at the moment of his awakening, the earth shook. Not only the earth, but also all the heavens were shaken. What that means is that this was a signal event, the kind of event around which you can arrange your life. Even though it was a long time ago, its implications are very direct right here, right now: the knowledge that wherever you are, whatever situation you're in, there's always the skillful act in that situation.

Now it may mean that you have to give up some of your pleasures, some of whatever you're attached to. Sometimes the skillful thing may be that you'll have to die skillfully. We're all going to have to die at some point. It doesn't matter when. It doesn't matter whether it comes early or late. What matters is *how* you do it. That's the perspective that you get from taking seriously the fact that the Buddha did gain awakening.

So remember that even though there are times when you don't have much opportunity to sit with your eyes closed or to do walking meditation, there's always the opportunity to practice. Always keep that question in mind: "What is the skillful thing to do now?" And keep informing that question with what you've learned, both from your own practice and from the fact that the Buddha did gain awakening. It's conviction in that awakening that gives strength to your mindfulness and your alertness and your ardency and helps make them right mindfulness, right alertness, and right ardency. That's a practice you can do all the time.