

Significance

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During my years with Ajaan Fuang, there were times when I'd be staying with him in Bangkok, fixing his tea and sitting in one corner of the room while he was teaching other people. I got to hear a lot of things: different people's problems as they came to the meditation, and how Ajaan Fuang would solve them. It was interesting that as people were starting out, they had a wide variety of problems, all over the place. But as the practice progressed, the problems got more and more similar. And when people reached the stage where the breath energy was filling the body and the breathing stopped, from that point on they all followed the same steps. There wasn't much room for personal expression as the practice developed.

This is one thing you have to keep in mind: that the significance of the practice lies not so much in doing something that no one else has done or in doing it in a new way. It's in realizing that this is the best thing you can do with your mind, being willing to train yourself; to submit to the training. Now, this is not to say that it's simply a matter of obeying lessons. After all, there is room for using your ingenuity as you face problems in the meditation and other aspects of the practice. But it's ingenuity aimed at a particular end, a common end for all of us: to find a happiness that's harmless and a happiness that doesn't disappoint; a happiness that doesn't change. The Buddha found it in one place, and we're all aiming at that same place.

So as you're looking for significance, this is where it lies: in training the mind so that it can be harmless. There's not much news out there about harmless people, and yet they're the really important people in the world: the ones who know that the search for happiness has to be responsible. You can't just take your pleasures where you find them, or where you want to find them. You have to think about the consequences. Few people do that.

Years back, I was asked to write a review of a book on positive psychology, and to provide a Buddhist take on the topic. What I noticed in the book was that there was no consideration of how the different ways that you could look for happiness had an impact on your own happiness for the long term or on the happiness of other people. There was some discussion of different levels of happiness, how some people find their kicks and how others find deeper pleasures in life than just sensory pleasures. The author did treat the issue of the different depths of happiness, but to be "objective" the author kept saying, "We can't think about the morality of the way people find happiness. We have to look simply at the fact of happiness itself."

So that's where I took issue with the book. You've got to consider the consequences of your actions. The Buddhist take, as I saw it, was that you have to consider the kamma of how you find happiness. And it was interesting: The editors of the magazine who had asked me to write the review said they were very surprised that that was the approach I took: kamma, rather

than something abstract, like emptiness. I kept thinking, “What other approach would you take?”

You have to think about the consequences of your actions. You show some responsibility when you do, when you’ve acted in a way that doesn’t harm anyone. That’s really significant. That’s something we should learn how to appreciate more and more. There is room for individual expression. You look at the different perfections, and generosity in particular. There are lots of different ways you can be generous. The Buddha placed no constrictions on them, simply that you shouldn’t harm yourself or harm others in being generous. Think of the time when he was asked by King Pasenedi, “Where should a gift be given?": The king— because he’d heard from the brahmins, “A gift should be given to the brahmins,” and from the Jains, “A gift should be given to the Jains”—was expecting the Buddha to say, “Give to the Buddhists.” But the Buddha didn’t say that. He said, “Give where you feel inspired, where you felt the gift will be well used.” As for *what* you want to give, he didn’t place any restrictions on it.

He did say that if you want to make generosity into a skill, then there are other considerations. You have to think about the attitude you’re bringing to the gift. You want to be attentive while giving it, and have an attitude of respect and sympathy for the recipient. Your motivation might start at the lowest level: “I’ll get this gift back some day; or by being generous, I’ll get other people to like me.” But then, from there, the motivation can rise to higher levels: “It doesn’t seem right that I have something that other people don’t have,” or, “I have enough to share. I should give,” or simply the attitude that generosity is a good thing. The more refined your motivation, the higher the results.

Then there’s the gift itself. It’s good to give something that it’s timely. In other words, you don’t give scarves in the middle of summer.

And as for the recipient, as the Buddha said, the best recipients are those who are free from greed, aversion, and delusion and those who are practicing for that purpose. Those are the people who will make the best use of the gift.

But all this is optional. It’s up to you to decide how much skill you want to bring to the gift giving. And you’re perfectly free to decide what kind of gift you want to give: whether it’s a material thing, a gift of your time, a gift of your knowledge, a gift of forgiveness, a gift of your energy. The Buddha wanted to emphasize the freedom in generosity, because that’s where you really first sense your own freedom of choice. That’s what the teaching of kamma is all about: You do have freedom of choice in the present moment. There maybe influences coming in from the past placing some restrictions on what you can choose, but there’s still this freedom.

You can always choose to do something skillful or something unskillful, given the situation. In fact, the situation itself is shaped by your actions right now, as much as it is, or even more than, by things coming in from the past. There may be some things you can’t change coming in from the past. But when the Buddha explains causality, your intentions in the present are actually prior to your experience of the six senses, which is where you sense your

old kamma. What you're doing right is what's really important. That element of freedom is there because it's prior.

So when the Buddha talks about kamma, principles of skillful and unskillful kamma, he starts with generosity because that's your first experience of freedom in action. When you first give a gift because you really want to, not because you have to: That's your first real experience of freedom. You could surrender to your anger, you could surrender to your greed, but you don't. And he wants to underscore that. This is why the monks have the rules about when someone comes and asks, "Where should I give this gift?" The monk should say, "Give where you feel it will be well used. Give where you feel inspired, or where you'll feel it'll be well taken care of." That's it. The monk can't say, "Give to this group; give to that group." The monk has to respect the freedom of the donor's choice. That's one of the main lessons of generosity.

So that's the area in which you can exercise your creativity: in the gifts you give to the world. Whatever self-expression you want to have in the practice, that's the area where the self-expression is best exercised. But when it comes to other areas of the practice, you don't have to keep on re-inventing the Dhamma wheel. What the Buddha taught about concentration is still true. What he taught about mindfulness is still true. All the teachings in the noble path are still true, always true, all down the line. These are the things you want to keep in mind. This is the duty of mindfulness.

We were talking today about all the different things you keep in mind, or you could keep in mind. It's good to start with the teachings that the Buddha said are categorical. On the one hand, the teaching that skillful actions should be developed and unskillful ones should be abandoned. And then from that, you can draw out the four noble truths and their duties: comprehending suffering, abandoning its cause—the cause there, of course, would be an unskillful action; developing the path, which is a skillful action; and realizing the cessation of suffering. Everything you need to know lies under those duties. That's the main framework you want to keep in mind. And as I said, staying with the breath, staying in the present moment, trying to keep the mind as still as possible, helps you access your memories of what worked and what didn't work in the past and of what you should or shouldn't be doing right now.

When the mind is running around, it can't access things. It's like having a big set of drawers. When you're still, you can reach out to all the different drawers. When you're running around, the drawers are over here, but you're over there. You can't access them. This is why we try to stay with the breath, being alert to the breath and to whatever else is coming in the mind. When you're with the breath, all four frames of reference are right there. The breath itself is your experience of the body. Feelings come up. They're right there with the breath. You try to decide, is this a feeling that should be developed, or one that shouldn't? The same with mind states. And the question is, how do you get feelings and body and mind altogether so that you're aware of the whole body in a sense of well being that fills the whole body?

When I was in Singapore recently, someone raised the question, “What is this business about spreading breath energies throughout the body? The Buddha never said anything about breath energies.” Well, there are a lot of things the Buddha didn’t say about the practice. He sketched out the main outlines. It’s for us to fill in the details. For instance, there’s that passage where he says that when you get the mind to settle down with a sense of pleasure and rapture and fullness around your object, you should spread that well-being through the body. But he doesn’t say how. This is where Ajaan Lee’s teachings on spreading the breath energy are really useful. They give you some ideas to explore for how you could use the breath energy to spread the pleasure and rapture around so that you can have body, feelings of pleasure, and mind all together right here.

Then, when things are out of balance, you can access those different lists of dhammas in the fourth frame of reference. You’re dealing with a hindrance right now? Okay, what do you do with a hindrance? When mindfulness and concentration come up, what do you do with those? If something is the cause of suffering, then you abandon it. If something is a part of the path, you develop it. So the Buddha’s giving you things to put in those drawers.

Then, of course, you add things to the drawers by your own experiences so that when you’re right here, they’re all available. Something comes up and you can remember what to do. And if it’s something brand new that you’ve never experienced before, you watch it for a while until you learn how to recognize it. This way the mind comes more and more together to that spot we’re all aiming at, which is a really satisfying and totally blameless happiness. This is what brings us together, regardless of our background.

That was one of the things I really appreciated when I was with Ajaan Fuang, the sense of extended family among his students, including people of all kinds of backgrounds. And I was part of the family, even though my skin and eyes were different from theirs. Ajaan Fuang had said he wanted me to become one hundred percent Thai if I was going to study with him. In other words, being a Westerner was never going to be an excuse that I was couldn’t do this, couldn’t do that. But beyond that, there was a large sense of acceptance.

So we can learn from one another’s differences, but we can also learn from the fact that we have something in common. We realize that the source of our suffering isn’t this group or that group outside. It’s here inside. And that brings us together. We start with our separate ways, start with our separate places. But the practice brings us together so that together we can do something really significant: We can train our minds so they don’t keep wandering around, creating trouble; so that they can find the ultimate possible happiness that imposes no burden on anyone at all.