

Taking Responsibility

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The Buddha once said there are two things that can spark awakening. One is the voice of another, and the other is appropriate attention. This parallels another teaching where he said that the most important external factor for awakening is friendship with admirable people; the most important internal factor again is appropriate attention. In other words, sometimes something you've seen or heard from another person inspires you to think in new ways, to question things in new ways, to look in new ways. And other times you simply start asking questions yourself. The Buddha defines appropriate attention as this ability to put aside fruitless questions and to focus on the ones that are fruitful. As for the voice of another person, that can give you instructions as to what to do, advice for the meditation, and at the same time hopefully raise some questions. But again you've got to filter what those other voices send. Sometimes your filter is good; sometimes your filter is bad.

So you've got to be very careful about how you listen to the Dhamma to make sure that you're filtering it in the right way: getting the points that are useful to you, that will open up new perspectives, that will question some of your basic assumptions. We all come to the practice with assumptions. Some of them are skillful, some of them are not. Some of them we've learned from what we think is the best authority: We've read them in the suttas, we've read them in the writings of great masters from the past. But again, even our reading is filtered through our assumptions. So you have to learn how to question them. This is why it's good to have the voice of someone from outside because things that appear perfectly obvious to us may not appear obvious to them. They may want us to question them.

One of the ways we can fight against delusion in the practice is by getting perspectives from outside. But as Ajaan Lee once said, what's really important ultimately are the questions you learn to ask. Meditation is like a skill. The teacher can teach you the basic techniques. It's like a skill of learning how to weave a basket. The teacher can teach you lots of different weaving patterns, but whether you will weave well or not is up to you: your own powers of observation, learning to look at what you've done and see what needs to be changed, learning how to see the connection between the state of mind that you bring to the weaving and the results that you get. Sometimes it's simply a question of learning to make your fingers more nimble. Other times it's a question of learning to be more and more attentive to your own actions.

There's no teacher who can tell you, "Okay, do this, this, this, and you're going to get awakened." You can't abdicate responsibility. You have to be responsible for how well you understand the teachings, and for how well you observe what you're doing. Your powers of observation are going to make all the difference in the world. The Buddha didn't claim to invent, say, the different levels of jhana, but he came up with a new idea for how to use them. He tested the idea and found that it worked.

It's in this way that Buddhism is like a science. Sometimes that analogy can

be overdone, but there are some important parallels. On the one hand, science is partly an issue of technique: how you go about trying to test a thesis, the proper steps and scientific procedure. But then there's also that wild card part of science: which questions are worth asking. That's not just a matter of technique. Some questions can go unasked for generations until somebody has a crazy idea to start asking a question everybody else thought was too unimportant to ask. And it turns out then though that great discoveries come as a result of asking the new question.

People in the Buddha's time thought that getting into strong states of concentration was an end in and of itself. He mastered their techniques, did what he was told, and found that he still wasn't satisfied with the results. So instead of trying to find someone else to tell him what to do, he realized he had to ask some new questions. He tested other techniques on his own, virtually starving himself with all sorts of austerities for years—six years they say. Then he finally realized that that wasn't working. He had the good sense to ask the question: Might there be another way? That was when he thought of the time he'd been sitting under a tree when he was young, entered the first jhana, and instead of just getting nostalgic about it, he asked another question: Could this be the way to awakening? Notice here that, unlike his earlier teachers, he didn't take the jhana as an end in and of itself. He wanted to explore it as a path. That was a whole new way of thinking about these states of mind. It was because he was able to ask those questions that he ultimately got himself on the path and gained awakening.

So even though the Buddha's teachings are all laid out, it's important to remember how he went about his practice: by asking questions. Because we can hear the teachings, we can understand them, we can think about them, but if you don't start asking questions, nothing happens. It just becomes plain technique without any real insight. This is why Ajaan Fuang always said to observe, to watch. And his attitude when he gave meditation instruction was not, "Just do this and don't think, and come back when you've got guaranteed awakening." He said, "Try this out. If it doesn't work, we can work with it." He wanted you to take responsibility for your actions. He wanted you to take responsibility for your meditation.

You see this in the teachings of all the great ajaans. Ajaan Mun would sometimes say things in his Dhamma talks, and Ajaan Maha Boowa would listen to them and think about them, because they just didn't make sense. He reports one time coming back to Ajaan Mun and saying, "That point you made in your Dharma talk the other day, I tried to figure out what you meant." And Ajaan Mun kind of smiled and said, "Oh, there's someone who is trying to figure out what I say?" And Ajaan Maha Boowa would give an answer to what he had figured out, and Ajaan Mun wouldn't say whether the answer was right or wrong. In other words, he wanted Ajaan Maha Boowa to be responsible for what he was doing, for the questions he asked, and the answers he got.

You look at the Buddha's path and it's all a matter of questions. He advises Rahula to ask questions about his actions, to ask questions about his intentions. If you plan to do something, ask yourself: What are the results going to be? Are they going to be harmful or not? While you're doing an action, ask yourself: Are the results of what I'm doing right now harmful or not? When the action is done:

Were the results harmful or not? Wisdom, he said, starts with that question: What will I do that will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? And when you're meditating, he says, you go to a teacher and you ask questions: How can I get the mind to be more still? How can the mind be focused? How can it be settled down? These are useful questions to ask for the purpose of gaining tranquility. For the purpose of insight the questions are: How should fabrications be regarded? How should they be analyzed?

You get some answers but then again you have to take those answers and apply them in your own practice to see if they work. If they don't work, you come back again. Maybe get some more advice, or else figure out you've got to figure them out on your own. For getting insight, one of the series of questions the Buddha would have you ask is: Is this constant or inconstant? Sometimes you get into very strong states of concentration, and it seems about as solid as anything can be in your experience. You've got to ask: Is it constant or not? And if it's inconstant, is it stressful or not? If it's stressful, can it be taken as yourself? There's a whole series of questions that can lead to insight, and from insight to release.

But the Buddha doesn't throw everything up into the air. He gives you techniques for getting the mind to settle down, to be in a position where it can profit from the questions. You settle in with a sense of well-being, a sense of ease. Then you can start questioning because the mind is in a much better mood to question things. When you're feeling exasperated or beset upon, victimized, you tend not to want to ask questions or not want to question yourself, let's put it that way. Especially when you feel that you've been treated unjustly: That's one of the strongest senses of self there is in the world. When you're in that position, you don't want to hear any questions about whether you're really justified in your anger or not.

So you need to put the mind in a much better place where it can start asking questions about: where do you like to find your pleasure? This afternoon we talked a little bit about lust. Most of us are very firmly entrenched in lust, and we've got a lot of defenses around it. As the Buddha said, for most of us the only alternative to pain is sensual pleasure. We feel that if we're being asked to give up our attachment to sensual pleasure, we'd have nothing left but pain. One of the purposes of the practice is to show you that there is an alternative. You can get the mind into good strong states of concentration that don't depend on sensual passion.

So there is another alternative, but the Buddha doesn't have you stop there. Once you've attained that alternative, then he has you look back on the other ways you are used to find pleasure. Because for most of us, this pleasure of concentration becomes one more dish on the smorgasbord. We like to have concentration and we like to enjoy our old pleasures as well. But when you get the mind in a good solid state of concentration, you're in a much better position to look back and say, "This pleasure I get from the concentration: How does it compare to, say, the pleasure that comes from lust? That comes from sensual passion? Are the two compatible? Can you have them both, or do you have to give up one for the other?" It's a pretty radical thing, learning how to see that lust is not your friend, learning to look at all its drawbacks. Now you're in a much better place to do that. You can ask questions of all your different

defilements: your pride, your anger, your deluded fears.

The whole problem of delusion is that usually you're too deluded to see it. This is why the Buddha has that teaching on the voice of another person or friendship with an admirable person—to help you learn to see new possibilities. For me, meeting Ajaan Fuang was a very radical experience because it opened up a whole door on what was possible in life. There's more to life than just scrambling round for pleasures and then dying. There's more to life than a lot of what my preconceived notions told me was possible.

So this is largely the role of admirable friendship: to open your mind to new possibilities. The teacher is not there just to tell you what to do so that when you simply obey you're going to get guaranteed results. That doesn't give you any insight at all. It just turns you into an automaton, a robot, a computing machine. You put in the data and you get the results. The machine is not responsible for whether the data is any good. It's not responsible for the software; it just does what it's told and doesn't gain awakening. The purpose of the teacher is to suggest new possibilities. Then you have to explore them and learn how to suggest new possibilities for yourself, because the teacher is not always going to be there for you.

So an important element in training in the meditation is learning how to be responsible for your own meditation, responsible for being a good technician, and also learning to be responsible for asking the unexpected question, being responsible for willing to experiment, and being responsible for learning how to judge the results of your experiment. Because ultimately nobody else can judge those for you.

So reflect on the topic of appropriate attention, this ability to ask questions that give you insight into why there is suffering and how it can be stopped. You've got your laboratory right here: the body and the mind. These things have been showing their truths for who knows how many lifetimes, but you haven't noticed. If you learn to observe, the truths are there. There's nothing mysterious about them. It's simply a matter of learning how to look.