

In Training

August 15, 2010

When you meditate during a Dhamma talk, remember to keep the talk in the background and your meditation in the foreground, because the meditation is the most important part right now: bringing the mind to the present, focusing on the breath, noticing which sensations in the body tell you that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out, how to allow those sensations to be comfortable so that there's a sense of ease, wellbeing, an affinity for the breath. Allow those sensations, once they arise and are comfortable, to spread to different parts of the body. Because there is that danger, when things get comfortable with the breath, that you're likely to drift off if your range of awareness is too small.

So you have to work with the pleasure. The word *kammattana*, which is one of the names for the meditation, actually means that it's your occupation. It's the work you do: work on the mind. Even though you're aiming at having the mind settle down and develop a sense of ease, stillness, and respite, it takes work to get it there and to maintain it. Now, the work is pleasurable but it does require sensitivity and that you think strategically. How are you going to keep the mind from wandering off? Or when the breath is still and comfortable, how are you going to keep from falling asleep or drifting away into a state where you're not really sure where you are? It's comfortable, it's easeful, but you've lost your focus, which is not what you want.

So once there's a sense of ease, think of it spreading through the different parts of the body: around the torso, down the back, out the legs, in the neck, down the shoulders and out the arms, through the head—allowing all the different breath sensations in the body to connect so that they're working together instead of at cross purposes, so that the process of breathing becomes even more easeful, and you can maintain a full body awareness all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out. That's your work.

The talk is here to keep you at work, either to point out things you might do or to remind you of why you're here meditating. Think of it as a fence. If the mind is trying to wander off, the talk is right here to direct you back in, so you can keep at your work. We're in training. This is an activity you're doing and training yourself to do well.

There's a discourse where a group of monks are going to go into a foreign land, and so they go see Sariputta, to pay their respects. He asks them, "Suppose someone there asks you, 'What does your teacher teach?' How are you going to answer him?" So they ask his advice: What would be a good answer? If this were a normal modern classroom way of introducing Buddhism, the teacher would start out, "The Buddha taught four noble truths, or three characteristics, or an eightfold path." But Sariputta doesn't start out that way. He says, "Our teacher teaches the subduing of passion and desire."

Then he anticipates the follow-up question: passion and desire for what? The five clinging aggregates: form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness. And why does he teach dispassion for these things? Because if you cling to them, if you have passion and desire for them, then when they change, you're going to suffer. If you don't cling, there won't be any suffering.

It's interesting that when Sariputta starts out, he doesn't talk about a theory. He talks about an activity. Our teacher teaches an activity. We're trying to abandon passion and desire because we suffer from them. This is why we have those chants before the meditation, reflecting on aging, illness, death, separation, looking inside at the things you tend to identify as yourself or belonging to you.

And then the chant on the world: "The world is swept away. It does not endure." You look inside and everything is changing. You look outside and everything is changing. And the mind is a slave to its craving, so it keeps going for these things. This is why we've got to train. Now, notice that the Buddha doesn't say just go along with the change and you'll be okay, because that would leave you adrift.

The other day, I was reading a piece by someone saying that that's the Buddha's teaching: Don't resist change, and everything is going to be all right. But change can kill you. It can take you all sorts of places, like a

river: The river can take you out to the sea, where there's nothing but salt water, and along the way it can change really fast, as when it suddenly goes over a waterfall. In fact, this is one of the images the Buddha uses: If you don't train, you're floating along a river that will take you over a waterfall, hit you with rapids and whirlpools, and there are all kinds of animals in the river that can eat you up. So he's not suggesting that you just go with the flow, or dance with life. Dancing on a raft floating down a river can really get you in trouble.

Most people would say, "You're looking at the world in a negative way. Why does the Buddha focus on the negative so much? Doesn't he see the beauty and pleasure in life?" He does. He admits very openly that there is pleasure in the five aggregates. If there weren't pleasure, we wouldn't be stuck on them. But they don't offer just pleasure. They offer a lot of pain as well. And the problem is not whether the world is a good place or a bad place; the problem is that we cling to it and we make ourselves suffer because of the clinging. That's why we have to keep reflecting on the dangers inherent in these things, especially in the craving and the clinging, and in the objects of our craving and clinging. We have to reflect on the dangers inherent in all of this, and to keep that in mind.

This is why we're meditating. It's not just that the world is a wonderful place and we meditate to appreciate its wonder and to accept the bad with the good so we can keep on having a lot more of the good. We're here because the mind is making itself suffer over the world, over its sense of who it is, over the sense of the world it inhabits. This is why we've got to train it, in the same way an athlete in training has to eat certain things he might otherwise not like and to avoid things he might like, so he can strengthen himself and develop the skills he needs for whatever competition he's going to be engaged in. In the same way, we have to avoid things that are bad for the mind. They may not be bad in and of themselves, but if we start clinging to them, the clinging will bring us pain.

So we have to devote ourselves to the path. Some aspects of the path are really nice. When the mind does settle down and attain concentration, it's extremely pleasurable—a sense of fullness, refreshment, rapture, that can be food for the mind. In fact, the Buddha actually compares the different states of concentration to different kinds of food—good food, nourishing food.

But some aspects of the path are difficult. Renunciation is a big one. We're so used to going after sensual pleasures that it seems that that's what life is all about. If we didn't have sensual pleasures, life would be flat, tasteless, miserable. And the Buddha himself said that when he realized he was going to have to give up those pleasures, his mind didn't leap at the prospect. But then he reflected on the dangers inherent in holding onto these things, and so he was willing to let them go. And he found that in letting them go, or at least putting them aside, he opened to a whole new area for finding wellbeing inside.

This is one of the things we have to keep remembering: that renunciation is not deprivation, it's a trade. We're trading a lesser happiness for a higher one, one that's more lasting, or in the Buddha's words, more abundant. But because we're so addicted to our old pleasures, we have to keep focusing on their drawbacks. Otherwise we'll go sneaking back to nibble at them some more.

So an important part of insight is not just seeing things arising and passing away. It's also seeing where we're stuck on them. Where do we find our gratification? Why do we like to feed on these things? Then we turn around and look at their drawbacks. What bad things happen when we feed on these things?

This is all part of the training. Again, sensual pleasures in and of themselves are not bad. What's problematic is the mind's feeding habits, its willingness to enslave itself to its cravings. In the sutta from which that passage was drawn, Ven. Ratthapala was talking to a king who doesn't understand why Ratthapala would go off and ordain. He was wealthy, healthy, had a good family. Why on earth would he ordain?

Ratthapala replied with those four Dhamma summaries about the world. Of course, "world" here means not just the outside world, but also the world of the mind. The last summary, the world is a slave to craving, the king doesn't understand. He's not a slave. And so Ratthapala asks him, "Suppose someone were to come to you from the east, saying that there's a kingdom to the east. It's wealthy, prosperous, with everything you could want, and it doesn't have a strong army. You could conquer it. Would you go to conquer it?" The king says, "Of

course.” “How about if someone were to come to you from the south and say the same thing? Would you leave it alone or would you try to conquer it?” “Conquer it. Of course.”

The same with the west and the north. Then Ratthapala says, “Even if someone were to come from the other side of the ocean, saying that there was a kingdom over there, wealthy, prosperous, with a weak army. What would you do?” The king said, “I’d go conquer that one, too.” Ratthapala says, “There you are. You’re a slave to craving.” No sense of enough. You go through all these difficulties for your pleasures and what real gratification do they provide?

Another one of the summaries is that you have to leave everything behind at some point. All you have then is your kamma, the kamma of having killed, the kamma of having conquered. And the rewards you get from those bad actions: they slip through your fingers like water and they’re gone. Unlike the king, we may not be warlike but we do have our ways of acting unskillfully for the pleasures we see as attractive. Yet when we get them, they’re not all that satisfying. They do have their gratification. The Buddha is not denying that. But they also have their strong limitations.

And what are you gathering up? You’re not gathering those things up, because again, they just slip through your fingers. What you are gathering up is the kind of kamma that’s involved—the planning, the scheming, whatever’s involved, whatever’s required to get those things. You can’t just sit back and say, “Well, I am not going to try to attain anything at all.” Because the mind will try that for a while and realize there’s nothing there and so it goes back to its old habits of scrambling to find things that are going to disappoint it.

This is why the Buddha offers this training. This is something we can do to wean the mind away from its addictions, to free it from its slavery.

So that’s the issue. If you want freedom from things, you have to look at their negative side. You have to look at the drawbacks of the things that have you enslaved. Because actually, you enslave yourself with them. Look at the drawbacks of the food you’ve been feeding on, the food you’ve been feeding the mind, so you’ll be willing to change your feeding habits, to start feeding on the path instead, so that the mind can gain the strength where ultimately it doesn’t need to feed.

This is what’s so important in Sariputta’s introduction to what the Buddha taught. He focused on actions, particularly the actions of the mind: this passion, desire, this clinging, craving, this feeding. And then he explains the actions by which we can train the mind in new habits, so it can be freed from its slavery to these things.

So for the purposes of the training, we do have to look at the drawbacks of our attachments. It’s not because we’re blaming the world or are bad-mouthing the world. It’s because there’s something better. A couple months back, a woman came here and got very upset. I was commenting on how we’re not here for a sense of oneness, and she said, “I’ve had a wonderful sense of oneness in my practice. You can’t take that away from me.” I said to her, “It’s not that I am trying to take it away from you, it’s simply that there’s something better. As long as you hold onto that, you’ll never figure out what’s better.” She had a shocked look on her face, as if the idea had never occurred to her, that there might be something better than oneness with the world. But there is.

It’s what the Buddha keeps telling us. What you’ve got does have its good side, but as long as you focus on its good side, you’re going to be a slave. You’ll never be free. You have to learn how to look at its drawbacks, so that you can find something better.

Always keep that point in mind: that you’re in training. If you forget that you’re in training and go back to your old ways, you just go back to your old enslavement. You’ll never get free.