

Self-Reliance

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There are two principles the Buddha said are essential to awakening. One is external, the other is internal.

In some contexts, the external factor is simply said to be “the voice of another person.” In other words, there are times when you listen to a Dhamma talk and it wakes you up. There are cases in the Canon where the Buddha gives Dhamma talks and people immediately awaken, sometimes all the way to arahantship. But even if you don’t get that far while listening to a Dhamma talk, many times you do suddenly understand things you didn’t understand before because you hear a clear explanation or an explanation that goes straight to the heart.

At other times, that external principle is called “friendship with admirable people,” which in one spot the Buddha says is the whole of the holy life, the whole of the practice. Not in the sense that other people are going to do the practice for you, but you fully depend on them to know that this practice is possible.

Think of it. If we didn’t have a Buddha within living memory, how would we have any idea that there could be an end to suffering? Or that human beings could find that path and follow that path on their own?

That’s the external principle.

The internal principle is appropriate attention: learning to look at things in terms of the four noble truths, i.e., looking at things in terms of where there’s stress, where there’s a cause of stress, what things you can do to put an end to stress, and the actual fact that stress and suffering are ending. That’s a framework you want to keep in mind all the time.

And how does that framework develop? It develops here in your meditation, in mindfulness and alertness—particularly in alertness—and what’s called ardency. Alertness is the ability to see what you’re doing right now. Ardency is the whole-hearted desire and effort to be as skillful as you can in what you do.

It’s this principle of skillfulness that translates into appropriate attention. In other words, skills depend on there being cause and effect, and on the fact that some causes are productive of results that are better than others: more pleasant in the long term, less painful in the long term. You want to sensitize yourself to that.

So in the practice of mindfulness, for instance, you don’t just watch things arise and pass away in a very passive, non-reactive way. You’ve got to notice, okay, when some things arise, good things arise with them. When other things

arise, bad things arise with them. Or you want to notice, when good things arise, what else comes along with them, so that you can get a sense of cause and effect. In other words, you have to learn how to read your mind, read your body in these terms.

This is how you become your own mainstay. Because there is that principle in the practice: “The self is its own mainstay. Who else could your mainstay be?” Who else could you depend on to become more skillful? You’ve got to learn how to do it yourself.

You learn ideas of how to be skillful, suggested techniques in Dhamma talks, in books, but the essential element in the practice is learning to develop this quality of alertness together with ardency. That’s what it’s called in the context of mindfulness practice. As you develop in concentration or jhana practice, it becomes evaluation. You evaluate what you’re doing, how the breath is going, where it feels right, where it doesn’t feel right, and you make adjustments.

So appropriate attention doesn’t just sit there and look at things. It also moves you in the right direction. When you see that something’s skillful, then you realize there’s a duty that goes along with it: You want to develop it. If something’s unskillful you want to learn how to abandon it.

This is how you keep watch over your practice, so that when you’re off practicing on your own you can rely on yourself. It’s like having an internal teacher looking over your shoulder as you meditate, checking on how things are going.

Getting to know your own mind, getting to know your own breath this way is like getting to know a person. As the Buddha said, you have to spend a lot of time with a person and be very observant if you want to know if you can trust them. If you want to know the person’s purity, you have to have dealings with them. And again, only over time and by being very observant will you get to know how pure that person is in his or her dealings. If you want to know a person’s endurance, you have to observe the person in times of hardship. To get to know a person’s wisdom, you have to notice how the person frames a question and tries to answer a question. And again, only over time and by being very observant will you notice these things.

The same principles apply to the mind. You have to watch the mind, live with the mind, watch its dealings, see how it handles hardships, see how it frames questions. Look at what kind of questions your mind is asking and how it goes about answering them. This way you get to know your own mind. You learn how to read your practice to see how it’s going.

And it’s always best to take the breath as home base in the practice as you do this. Ajaan Lee calls it basically your home, *vihara-dhamma*. Other meditation techniques he says are *gocara-dhamma*, literally translated as

“where you forage for food,” where you roam around. But when you stay home, you want to stay home with the breath.

There’s that passage in the Canon where the Buddha teaches contemplation of the body to a group of monks and then he goes off into the forest. As they start contemplating on their own, they get off on a wrong track and become so disgusted with their bodies that some of them commit suicide, others hire assassins.

After a couple of months, the Buddha comes out of the forest and he notices that the community of monks is a lot smaller than it used to be, the ranks have thinned out. When he finds out what’s happened, he calls the remaining monks together and says, “Okay, when unskillful states arise in the mind, go back to the breath.”

Mindfulness of breathing, he says, when it’s done right—in other words, breathing in a way that you’re sensitive to the breath, you’re aware of the whole body as you breathe in, you let the breath calm down, you train yourself to breathe in such a way that you give rise to rapture and pleasure and you even let *them* calm down: This, he says, clears away unskillful mental states from the mind in the same way that the first rains of the rainy season clear away the dust of the hot season.

So the breath is the safest of all meditation objects. This means that if you notice something strange coming up in your mind and you’re not sure about whether it’s going to be helpful or not, step back a bit and just stay with the breath. Keep the breath as your frame of reference and you’ll be safe.

Or if you can develop that sense of a knower or simple awareness in and of itself as separate from the object: That’s even safer. But the breath is what leads you there. In the meantime, the sense of refreshment that can come from the breath can clean out a lot of the dry and strained states of mind that can sometimes get you to push yourself too hard in the meditation or to push yourself in the wrong direction.

So it’s important as a meditator that you learn how to read what’s going on in your mind and have the basic common sense to sense when you’re going overboard in any direction. In that way, whether you’re with the teacher or away from the teacher, you learn how to depend on yourself.

Because, after all, this is how the Buddha came about his own awakening. It wasn’t like those Star-Wars pictures you get in some of the Mahayana sutras of other previously-awakened Buddhas beaming their wisdom into his mind. He gained awakening because he noticed what his mind was doing, what the results were. It was as simple as that. And the greater the clarity of his alertness, the closer he came to awakening.

Now, it is possible when you meditate to get yourself into some pretty strange states of mind. And if you have that tendency to like to jump to

conclusions, that's dangerous.

There's a list in the commentaries of what they call the ten corruptions of insight: the things that lead people astray and make them think they're awakened when they're not. But the one of them is central, the one where you jump to conclusions: You're totally convinced that what you've experienced—whether it's light or knowledge or rapture or whatever, strong energy that enables you to stay up for long hours at a time—is awakening. Actually, none of that is awakening. But if you suddenly come to the conclusion, "This must be it," that closes the door.

So whatever attainment comes up, just stick a little question mark next to it and see what its long-term results are. That's what it means to be alert, to use your powers of evaluation. You see things in terms of cause and effect.

This is appropriate attention: looking at things in terms of cause and effect, seeing, "Is there any stress? Is there any suffering?" and figuring out what to do with what's there.

There are some people who get to a point where they say, "Well, it can never get any better than this because, after all, having a human body and a human mind, this is the way things are, so you learn how to accept them." That closes the door, too.

You keep it open when you ask yourself, "Is it possible that whatever level of stress or dis-ease there is in the mind could be abandoned?" And how do you abandon it? You don't abandon it directly. You abandon the cause. But you first comprehend that stress for what it is. You have to learn how to see that it's not necessary.

And the way to watch it is to see, "Is there any inconstancy there? Is it always there all the time? Does it never change?" This applies not only to obvious stress but also to subtle pleasures. If these things waver, it means that there's a wavering condition that you haven't ferreted out yet. So try to apply your appropriate attention there. Look for the cause; look for the result. When there's a wavering in the stress or a wavering in the pleasure, what else wavers at the same time? What movement of the mind happened?

This is how you read yourself. This is how you learn how to teach yourself. Because for all of us it's the same way, whether you're close to a teacher or not: You hear the instructions but then you've got to put them to the test and learn how to evaluate them on your own.

Like that image Ajaan Lee gives of learning how to weave a basket. The teacher can tell you how to weave a basket and can give you ideas about different patterns of weaving, how to shape the basket. But the words of the teacher won't make your basket beautiful.

You've got to make a basket yourself and then learn how to judge the results of your effort. Try to see the connection between what you did and the

results you get. Over time, as you get more and more sensitive to your own actions and develop a more refined sense of what's acceptable and what's not, you become a better and better basket weaver.

It's the same with the meditation. As you keep pursuing this issue of appropriate attention—Where's the stress, what's causing it, what can we do to put an end to it?—it makes you a better meditator, a more self-reliant meditator. And your meditation becomes safer.

So always keep this principle in mind.

We were talking earlier about the teachings saying that your problem is that you're not fully in the present moment, that you come to the moment with preconceived notions, whereas true awakening means having no preconceived notions at all. In other words, you've got to forget the past.

That's not what the Buddha taught. He said there are certain things you want to look for in the present moment in terms of appropriate attention. And always keep that framework in mind: That's what you remember, that's what you're mindful of as you meditate, because it points you to where in the present moment to look.

Otherwise, you could look at anything in the present moment. There's all kinds of stuff going on right now. You could look at the light as it reflects off the walls, or the background noise that comes even in a relatively secluded place like this. There are all kinds of things you could notice. But they're really irrelevant to the fact that you're still suffering, that there's still stress in your life, and that you need to do something about it because you're going to die pretty soon. If you don't take care of it now, when are you going to take care of it?

So always keep the principles of appropriate attention in mind. They're your internal source for awakening. As for whether you have the external source—admirable friends around or the voice of someone who can spark an insight—they're secondary. The primary issue is whether you can maintain appropriate attention at all times. That's what will see you through.