

Directing Yourself Rightly

July 10, 2008

Life doesn't come with an instruction manual. When we're born, we have no idea what's going on. We gradually piece things together bit by bit as best we can as we make decisions and as we start shaping our lives. We start shaping them even before we realize what's happening. By the time we've figured things out to some extent, we've already made some important decisions and may have made some pretty big mistakes.

By the time we come to the Dhamma, we're already in the middle of all this. What makes the Dhamma special is that it shows us a way out, because a lot of those muddling mistakes we make create a lot of suffering for ourselves or the people around us. An important part about choosing a life of the Dhamma is that you're not going to let yourself be a victim of circumstances.

Most peoples' lives, if you could draw a picture of them, would be like dust motes in a sunbeam. You see the dust mote jiggling around, going here, going there, drifting here, drifting there. It doesn't have any particular direction. The Buddha's image is of a stick being thrown up into the air. Sometimes it lands on this end; sometimes it lands on that end; sometimes it lands splat in the middle. There's very little rhyme or reason to it. Mostly it's pushed around by circumstances.

This relates to one of the principles the Buddha taught. He calls it "directing yourself rightly." This, he said, is one of the factors leading to progress in your life. When you finally figure out a direction you want to go in, particularly if it's a direction toward the end of suffering, it means that you have a goal. You're dedicated to that goal and you're not going to let yourself get deflected from it. It's not only a cause of progress. It's also protection from all those random impulses, both inside and out, that would make us live like dust motes.

When you're practicing the Dhamma, developing qualities of the mind, that's one of the purposes: to protect you from being a victim of circumstances, so that your practice doesn't have to depend on being here at the monastery, or being surrounded by wonderful, inspiring people, or totally free of disturbances. No matter where you practice, there are going to be disturbances, more or less. But it's amazing how, when the disturbances are small, you can magnify them. The mind does have this quality. That old adage, you know, that work expands to fill the time allotted to it? Well, in the same way, disturbances expand to fill your mind's capacity to look for them.

That's one of the things you've got to make up your mind about: You're not going to go around looking for disturbances, letting yourself get pushed around by them. You've got your direction. You're here to develop the training in virtue, concentration, and discernment because those are your treasures. Those are your protection. Progress in those things is genuine progress. When you look at the world outside, you see so many people living their lives, working on a particular cause, and then it all gets dashed to pieces by a change in the economy, a change in the climate—whatever the outside influences may be. So that kind of progress is uncertain. But progress inside, as you develop qualities of mind, can just keep on going and going and making greater and greater progress and ultimately arrive at something that's really solid and doesn't regress.

So you can ask yourself as you practice here: What is the direction you want to go in? What would it be to “direct yourself rightly”? And how would that translate into what you're doing from moment to moment? In terms of virtue, where are your precepts still sloppy? Where do you tend to gloss over things, saying that it doesn't really matter? Well, it does matter. Often those little, careless, it-doesn't-matter kinds of decisions add up. They become a habit, so that when you try to sit down and meditate, “Well, this doesn't matter/that doesn't matter” becomes, “This distraction doesn't matter. I'll follow it for a while—it won't do any harm—and see what happens.” It just eats away at your concentration and sometimes eats it all up. So try to develop a habit of being meticulous and learn how to carry that habit in a way that's comfortable.

This is where the concentration comes in to give you a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, an inner strength that's not deflected by things outside. But the concentration also has to be tempered with wisdom—discernment. Wisdom isn't an automatic result of concentration. Just because the mind is focused doesn't mean you're going to see things clearly and rightly. You have to actively contemplate once the mind is still, because a mind that's still can latch onto all kinds of things. The concentration can get suddenly focused on something that gets you irritated, something that gets you angry. And the stronger your concentration, sometimes the stronger your anger when you come out of good concentration. You've got to watch out.

Ajaan Lee has a nice observation. He says that the problem is that you get attached to your concentration, thinking that everything is fine as long as you concentrate, and the world out there is bad because it disturbs your concentration. He said you've got to remind yourself that the problem isn't out there. The problem is inside—this tendency of the mind to get stirred up by the world. You've got to contemplate to understand why the mind doesn't have to be

affected by things outside. Where is it allowing itself to be affected? That's something you actively have to figure out. You can't just have a mantra of "let go, let go" or "metta, metta"—or whatever, and hope that the mantra will take care of everything. You've got to understand why is it that you let yourself get disturbed and what the assumptions behind that are.

If your peace of mind is disturbed by the world at large—by the heat, by the flies, or by the irritating people around you—the heat, the flies and the irritating people are really not the problem. The problem is: Why do you set yourself up to be disturbed? You're the one who goes out after the disturbance. As Ajaan Chah says, it's not the sound that's disturbing you; you're disturbing the sound. Well, that applies to a lot of other things that destroy your peace of mind. You want the peace of mind *and* you want to take care of those situations outside? You've got to make your choice, one or the other. Which is more important?

Learn how to develop a peace of mind that's more porous. In other words, these disturbances can just go right through. It's like those hummingbirds that sometimes get caught in the multi-kuti. If they simply flew in the front door and out the back door, there'd be no problem. But they fly in, and then they get frightened. They buzz around the ceiling, trying to find a window, and usually choose all the wrong windows: the ones that can't open up. And it's the same with disturbances coming into the mind. If you could allow them just to go right through, there'd be no problem. The mind would be still; your awareness would still be aware. But you start capturing these things as they come through, and then they become a problem. Then you get upset about that. Well, what is this capturing? How do you do that, and how can you learn how *not* to do that? You've got to observe. You've got to watch it and figure it out.

So the wisdom is not a matter of just telling yourself to let go. It's a matter of understanding what the problem is. Once you really understand what the problem is, you don't have to tell yourself to let go at all. The mind automatically lets go of its own accord.

What this means is that you've got to take your peace of mind seriously and realize that the problems are not outside. The problems are inside. And getting angry at the problems doesn't help, whether they're inside or out. Getting angry at yourself doesn't help. Just simply note that there's a problem here that you don't yet understand.

Stick with the determination that you want to figure out this issue of suffering, and now you've got the opportunity to do it. Sometimes you start worrying about the future: "How much longer will I be able to do this?" That's getting in the way. You've got right now, and you can make the decision right now that regardless of

the circumstances outside, you're going to maintain your compass—your sense of direction—right now. You're going to keep it right.

This is what it means to be “rightly directed.” You look for the problems inside. The cause of suffering after all, the Buddha said, is craving that leads to further becoming: the craving to fantasize about situations in terms of your sense of “just right”; the craving to take on a particular kind of identity; or—when you don't like the identity you've got—the craving to have it destroyed. Thinking in terms of identity: That sets up this huge target that all the things in the world are going to come and attack because it's laying claims to the world: claiming that things have to be a certain way to maintain that identity. But if you simply look at things in terms of, “Where is there stress right now? What's causing it? And what qualities can I develop that allow me not to be a victim of those circumstances?”—or, if you can take the “me” out of it—“What qualities can be developed to stop that suffering?”—that's called being rightly directed. It's your protection.

In other words, instead of trying to make a bigger “you” that controls more of the circumstances outside, you step out of the way. Offer the world nothing to attack. There's a great passage in the Canon where a brahman comes to see the Buddha, and he's looking for a fight. He asks the Buddha, “What kind of teaching do you teach?” And the Buddha says essentially that he offers the kind of teaching whereby people don't get into useless fights. The brahman's at a loss for words. His eyebrows go up so far that his forehead wrinkles in four or five creases, and he goes away.

So we're not here to get into fights with the world to decide whether it's good or bad. We're here to solve a problem, and the problem comes from within. We try to develop the qualities that allow us to focus on that problem within so that we're not getting into fights with anything at all. This involves contentment in an unusual way. On the one hand, you learn how to content yourself with whatever the situation is outside. At the same time, though, you don't let yourself rest content with the state of your mind until it's reached the point where it really isn't suffering any more. As long as there's still suffering or there's still stress, there's still work to be done, so you don't rest content.

Try to gather up the strengths you can from within—the strengths of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—and keep them directed in line with your determination that you're *not* going to be a victim of circumstances. Your sense of direction will allow you to overcome circumstances so that regardless of where you are, your practice still takes top

priority and doesn't get deflected. That's your protection: It protects you and your potential for progress.