

Avoidance

November 13, 2009

We all come to the practice for the same basic reason, the fact that we're suffering and we're stressed out. We want to be able to train the mind so that we don't have to suffer from these things, but the way we understand our suffering varies from person to person. In some cases, it's in line with the Buddha's understanding, at least the way he taught. Other times, it's off in some other direction. And if we look at our minds we find often that different parts of the mind have different ideas.

We come to a quiet place like this just to get away from all the chatter of other people—their views, their opinions, their idea of what's important—and then we find that much to our consternation that when we sit here with our eyes closed there's still a lot of chatter going on in the mind. Some of it is a carry-over from what you've been hearing from other people, and some of it comes from the fact that now the pressure from outside has been released a lot of things can come bubbling up from inside: different ideas, different attitudes. Some of them you can put away simply by saying, "Hey, look, we're here to train the mind, we're here to stay with the breath, to get quiet for a while so we can sort these things out," but others don't go away so easily.

Those are the ones you have to question, probe, figure out: Why is this particular idea so tenacious? Is there some real issue that it's coming from or is it simply from the mind's own avoidance, the fact that it doesn't want to face the question of why it is that you're suffering or the fact that the main suffering comes from within: certain habits you've developed. You find there's a resistance to probing those habits.

So if you find that the mind can settle down peacefully, go ahead let it settle down. If it's not willing to settle down, you've got to ask, "What's going on here? What am I assuming?" After all, the Buddha asks you to bring a minimal number of assumptions to the practice: that the suffering that really weighs the mind down comes from its actions and that you are free to choose what you're going to do—"actions," here, meaning not just actions of the body, of course, but actions of the mind, the decisions, the choices in the mind. You have the freedom to change those. You're not totally determined. We're not machines that just have to suffer. We meet with this problem of suffering simply because of our own lack of skill.

It sounds easy enough—if you're unskillful, just practice and practice until you become more and more skillful—but you'll find resistance in certain parts, and this is going to vary from person to person. But a willingness to question your assumptions is basic, and that willingness can be backed up by the

realization that you really are suffering and you need to do something about it.

I was talking recently to someone who was eager to see that Buddhism become more responsive to people's demands and needs, but what he really wanted to see was the students in charge, telling the teachers what they wanted to learn, and the teachers would have to provide what the people asked for. That's treating the practice, treating Buddhism, as a commodity. Something's going to be sold and you have to be sensitive to the desires of the buying public—but the question is, who is that putting in charge? And here I'm not talking about which people. I'm talking about which attitudes, which ideas does that put in charge? Sometimes they may be good honest attitudes and sometimes they're dishonest and way off the mark.

So you need the willingness to question yourself, the willingness to say, "Okay, I'm going to put in the effort and put some of my assumptions aside for the time being." That's how you really get to see your assumptions to begin with and to test them.

This is why you hear those stories about people aspiring to join Zen monasteries having to sit outside, huddled up against the gate for 24 hours just to show how sincere they are—and it's not just a matter of religious practice. Throughout Asia there's a feeling that skills are have a certain dignity, and that the teacher's the one who gets to choose who gets to study the skill. The teacher has to be impressed by the student's dedication. That's part of the reason for that tradition of sitting outside overnight. At the same time, going through that experience the student gets to ask him or herself: How much do I sincerely want to do this practice?

I'm sure that while you're sitting huddled there against the gate for 24 hours, you get a lot time to think: "Do I really want to do this? Is this crazy?" It's a rite of passage.

One of my acupuncturists told me of the time after he'd finished his medical training—he had learned Western medicine and Chinese medicine in a college in Taiwan—he wanted to further his training in traditional medicine. He heard that there were two doctors still alive who'd studied with a very famous acupuncturist who was now dead. One was good at reading pulses and the other was good at giving needles in the right way. He wanted to study with both. One was a lay person; the other was a monk. He went to the monk, who was the one that was good at giving needles. The first requirement the teacher made of him was to hand him a coil of wire and say, "Make a thousand needles for me." So the doctor went back and made the thousand needles and came back. The monk seemed a little surprised, but on the basis of that he decided to train him. Now, what was important wasn't just the physical effort that went into making those needles. It was the time he had to think, "Do I sincerely want to do this? What inside me resists?" By the time he reached the

thousandth needle, he decided, “Okay, I really want to do this.” He’d sorted it out inside.

An important part of meditation is doing this sorting out inside you, when you find the meditation difficult because this battle is going on in the mind. Part of the mind wants to think about something else, and part of the mind wants to do the practice. It’s not simply a matter of just waiting for things to settle down, although sometimes they will, but there are times when you’ll also have to engage with your resistance to see where it’s coming from, why the mind doesn’t want to settle down, why it doesn’t want to look at what it’s doing that’s causing suffering.

Often we find—as we get more and more quiet, more and more attuned to what’s going on—that we have certain habits that we really like and yet they cause suffering. We don’t like to see the fact that they cause suffering. We like our cravings. We really like our desires. We like our greed, aversion, and delusion—and that’s disconcerting. We prefer to think that the problems in the mind simply come from the fact that you’re out there in society dealing with all kinds of crazy people, and if you just get away from them for a while, distancing yourself from your social conditioning, the mind will settle down and it’ll be nice and in touch with its innate nature. But then you find that what you’ve got here is a very problematic mind.

The way to get around that, of course, is to not to look at it as one mind. There are lots of minds in there. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha, when he was teaching, wasn’t very specific about defining certain things, especially what things are. Like what is your mind: He never defined it. Instead, he said to look at its activities, to see where you have a choice. And if part of the mind says that you don’t have any choice, that you have to do things in a certain way, question that. Otherwise your defilements stay in charge.

That’s what lies behind the consumer-driven approach to Buddhism, which sees Buddhism as a commodity, as something you’ve got to sell to yourself, sell to your defilements. Ultimately you’ve got to realize that there are certain things that are just true in and of themselves, whether you like them or not. We have to bring our level of truth up to that, our level of honesty.

A while back I was talking to a psychologist about a project I’m working on, a book on questions, and he was especially interested in the idea of questions that should be put aside, because that’s one of the duties, apparently, of a psychotherapist: finding that the person undergoing therapy will sometimes come up with questions that are a means of avoidance. They’re trying to get away from really looking at themselves and so the therapist has to say very firmly, “You’ve got to put that particular question aside.”

You see the same in the Buddha’s texts. There was a monk who came to the

Buddha one time and demanded, “I’m not going to practice until I get your answer on these questions,” and he went down a standard list of hot topics of the day: “Is the universe eternal, is it not eternal? Is it finite, is it infinite? Is the soul the same thing as the body, is it something different from the body? What happens to an awakened person after death? Does that person still exist, not exist, both, neither?” And the Buddha saw the monk’s demand for what it was: avoidance. The monk didn’t want to look at his own suffering and what he was doing to cause the suffering, what he had to master in order to put an end to it. So the Buddha refused to answer his questions because, as he said, the end of suffering doesn’t depend on whether the world is eternal or not, or any of those other answers. It depends on your looking at your suffering and learning how to comprehend it—you see what’s causing it and you learn how to let go of the cause—and developing the qualities you need in order to do this skilfully.

So you may find as you’re sitting here that you’ve gone to all the trouble of coming here to meditate, to practice, you sit down, and yet you find part of your mind balks, doesn’t want to do it. You’ve got to question it. Don’t just hope it’ll go away. Sometimes you can avoid it for a while and it’s wise to just put it aside for the time being, saying, “I’m not going to go there, I’ll just do the practice,” but there will be a point where it comes back and you have to face it.

That’s when you’ve got to learn how to look behind the question. What’s motivating the question? Is it simple avoidance? What are you trying to protect? What unskillful habit, what cherished way of doing things are you unwilling to look at? Often you’ll find that once you’ve gotten behind the question you’ll see that it was motivated by an unskillful mind-state. It’s not really worth asking after all. Some questions will be answered in the experience of awakening, but with other questions, the practice will help you see through the fact the question was based on a strange assumption that really had no usefulness at all.

With the questions the Buddha recommends putting aside, it’s not simply a temporary thing. He’s not saying to put those things aside for now and then once you’ve got awakened you’ll get all the answers you’ve ever wanted about these things. You do get answers but they’re different answers from what you expected. He points out the fact that once people are awakened they look back at these questions and they have no interest in them at all. They realize they were total distractions motivated by unskillful states of mind.

That’s the part we don’t like to see: They’re not mere innocent diversions. They’re subterfuges, the tricks of the mind throwing up resistance. So if you notice these things coming up in the practice and you find you can simply put them aside for the time being, that’s fine. But if they keep coming back, coming back, you’ve got to ask yourself, “Where is this coming from?” Look

for the motivation. Each question is a kind of kamma. To understand the kamma, you've got to look at the motivation behind the questions, and then when you've dispatched it you can get back to the practice. The act of dispatching it is an important part of the practice. This is what insight is all about: seeing how the mind hides from itself, how it makes demands that really get in the way.

As the Buddha explained to that monk, to demand answers to those question is to be like someone who's been shot with an arrow and who refuses to have the arrow removed until he's learned who shot the arrow and who made the arrow, what feathers were used in the arrow, what kind of wood. If you tried to trace that down, the man would die first. In the same way, we're all dying from our suffering. If we're not physically dying from our suffering, our goodness is dying. The mind finds it harder and harder to do the skillful thing. We have to focus on getting the arrow out because once the arrow's out then you don't care what kind of feathers it had. The real problem has been taken care of.

Sometimes your defilements will come up and say, "This has to be taken care of and I've got to figure this thing out first," or whatever comes with a real sense of urgency. They play the same tricks on you that people outside play on you. This is what the work of meditation is all about. It's not necessarily about what's urgent, it's about what's important. When you're bombarded with thoughts that "This has to be done now," if you don't stop and ask, "Well, is this really important?" your life gets frittered away with urgent things. If, when you come to meditate, you run into an urgent demand of your defilements, you have to keep asking yourself, "Is this really important?" When you learn to make the distinction between urgent and important, you will have gone a far way on the path—and you'll have an important tool to keep going further.