

## *Look at Yourself*

*August 21, 2010*

It's too bad we don't have two sets of eyes: one for looking outside and another for looking inside. Having one set of eyes looking outside, we get very good at looking at other people and not so good at looking at ourselves. So when we're unhappy, we see what's wrong with other people and blame our unhappiness on them—"This person criticizes me, that person doesn't help me," whatever—and that's why there's so much turmoil in the world. We have a very clear idea of what other people should be doing and how they're not doing it, and not a very clear idea about what we should be doing but are not.

Ajaan Suwat used to like to say that "Each of us has only one person in the world, that's yourself"—in other words, one person we're responsible for. And as the Buddha said, "You don't go to heaven or hell because of other people's actions. You go because of your own actions." Those can take you to heaven; they can take you to hell. So why are you taking yourself to hell? And why are you upset with what other people are doing, which really has nothing to do, really, with you? It's your actions that make all the difference.

This is why we meditate: not so that we can meld into some sense of Oneness with the universe or to get in touch with the inner spaciousness out of which arises insights that we can implicitly trust. We meditate so that we can get really clear about what's going on in the mind in the present moment, what its intentions are. Because your intentions are what shape your experience. There's the input from your past intentions and then your present intentions and the results of the input from your present intentions. Those three things are what you really want to focus on.

As for the results of your past intentions, they're there for you to learn from. If you did something skillfully, remember it. If you did something unskillful, remember. That's what mindfulness is for, so that you can learn these lessons and apply them. You can't go back and change what you did, but you *can* make choices in the present moment. So you try to be alert, discerning, focused, so that you can be really clear about what intentions are there in the mind and how you're following them or not following them, and what the results are—because sometimes you can see the results right away.

You notice this especially when you work with the breath. Simply focusing on the breath

in a certain way, you immediately get certain results. If you focus with too much force, the breath feels uncomfortable. It feels like it's been trapped. If your focus is too vague, you find yourself wandering off. So you really want to stay focused right here in a way that's just right to see what's going on. This is what you really have control over.

We were talking today about the teaching about the cycle of karma. There's the intention, then there's the result of the intention, and then there's your reaction to it, and the reaction can either be skillful or unskillful. There can be a defilement there, and if there's a defilement, then that colors your next action, your next intention. If the defilement is really strong, you can start going in a really downward spin.

So in the beginning, you want to make sure you're going into an upward spin. Suppose a pain comes up: Instead of immediately focusing on, "Well, what did somebody do to make me hurt or feel bad or feel abandoned or made me feel unwelcome?" Turn around and ask, "Exactly how am I taking that person's words and turning them into something that's going to cause me to behave in an unskillful way?" That's where your real responsibility lies. Your ability to turn something negative into something positive, or something positive into something even more positive, is an important skill. You don't learn it just by keeping the mind still. You've got to learn how to think.

There was one time when Ajaan Fuang took a group of people up to the chedi there at Wat Dhammasathit to meditate, but someone had scattered garbage all over the area around the chedi, so everybody had to clean it up. The original plan had been to go up and meditate, but they found themselves cleaning up the garbage instead. One of the people complained: "How could anybody scatter garbage around the chedi like this? What were they thinking?" And Ajaan Fuang said, "Don't complain. If they hadn't scattered the garbage, we wouldn't have the chance to get the merit of cleaning it up."

So there you are, there's merit in cleaning up. There's merit in learning how to carry more than your share. There's merit in learning how to put up with criticism and not get upset by it—in other words, merit in learning how to deal skillfully with unpleasant situations. It's an important skill on the path because when you think about it, the unpleasantness of living with one another is nothing compared to the unpleasantness of aging, illness, and death, yet we get so worked up about it. Sometimes here at the monastery the unpleasantness seems even more blatant than outside because after all we're all here to practice the Dhamma and yet we see how other people are not up to our standards.

Sometimes it's easier to deal with people who are out in the business world because you know they're not necessarily there out of good motives, but when you're dealing with really nice people and you start asking them, "Why is your motivation so unskillful?" they get really upset. And yet you see their behavior, and *you* get upset. But again, that doesn't mean that we have to get upset about one another's behavior. Learn how to look inside. Try to develop the gaze that turns around and looks at your actions, looks at your reactions, because what you're really responsible for is the reaction that may turn into a defilement, which is going to cause unskillful intentions, which keeps this, the cycle, going round in unfortunate ways.

At the very least, if you sense a defilement coming up, anger in particular, just make up your mind that you're simply not going to act on that anger. It's like seeing that a wheel is rolling off in a bad direction or your car is going off in a bad direction and you're able to put a block in the way, so you can at least stop it. It may not solve the problem but at least it makes sure that you're not going further, further, further down in a downward spiral.

Where the real break is made is between the result of one of your actions and the defilement that can arise there. If you can learn how not to have that defilement arise, that's where you really cut the cycle. So those are the two places you want to focus, looking at your reaction to things and then looking at your intentions, and try to cut all the unskillful connections that might be there. That requires that you look inside.

If each of us is looking inside in this way, there will be no problems. We can live in harmony and our presence here is actually a help to the practice.

There's one useful thing that comes from looking at one another, and that's if you see somebody doing something unskillful, ask yourself, "Do I have that behavior? Is that one of my habits? Do I act in that way?" And when you can see clearly that it's not very good to see in someone else, you can tell yourself, "Well, if I do the same sort of thing, it's going to look that bad as well." In other words, you look at other people as you would in a mirror, because otherwise it's very hard to see where your unskillful habits are and how bad they look.

Again this is the problem: We don't have a set of eyes where we can watch ourselves. So when you see someone else's unskillful behavior, reflect: "Do I have that kind of behavior in my repertoire?" If you know that you do, okay, now you've got something to learn from, an area to focus your attention. If you don't have that kind of behavior in your repertoire, spread a lot of goodwill to that person, a lot of compassion.

The implication of Ajaan Suwat's comment that we have only one person we're

responsible for is that we've got to focus on straightening ourselves out, and our problem is that we're always trying to straighten out everybody else. As a result, they don't like it, and in the meantime, the work that we should be doing in straightening ourselves out doesn't get done.

The Buddha once said that this is a sign of wisdom: knowing what is your duty and what's not your duty. The fool, he said, neglects his own duty and sticks his nose into the duties of other people. The wise person knows to look after his or her own duty. As for other people, if it's not your duty, you leave them alone.

That principle is a very simple everyday kind of principle but it goes deep into the practice. When you start looking at the suffering in the body and the mind, you'll see that some things are your duty, that you really do have to look after, and there are other kinds of suffering that you have to let go. The suffering or stress that's involved in the fact that things simply change: That's part of nature, something you can't change. You can slow it down a little bit, but given the way the body is, it's inevitable that it's going to age, it's going to grow ill, it's going to die. That's natural stress.

But there's another stress that you're actually responsible for, and that's the kind of stress that comes from craving and ignorance: that whole constellation of things actually going on in your mind and that you're actually responsible for. That's something you can do something about. And it turns out that that's the stress that really weighs on the mind. If there isn't that stress, then the stress of aging, illness, and death doesn't weigh on you at all.

So this principle of knowing what's your duty and what's not your duty is not just a simple everyday affair. It's the beginning of the discernment that goes deeper and deeper into the practice.

This is a common principle throughout the Buddha's teachings: that what sounds like basic everyday stuff actually has deeper implications in the mind. Like the Buddha's instructions to Rahula about looking at your actions: If you see you're doing something harmful, learn how to stop. That applies to your meditation as well. Learn to look at your meditation as an activity and even when you get into very refined states of concentration, you'll find if you're really sensitive that there's an element of stress. It's hard to say it's harmful at that point, but there is an element of stress, an element of disturbance. When you can catch yourself doing whatever it is that's causing that disturbance—say, in the way you perceive things, the way you focus on things—and you learn how to drop that, you can go into deeper

and deeper states of concentration.

This is why it's so important that you look at yourself, because that way you learn how to look more and more carefully at your own mind. If you're constantly focusing outside, you're going to miss what's happening in your mind even as you sit and meditate. There'll be that habit to focus outward, to slip off into some theory or to slip off into some abstract idea about things rather than really looking at the movements of the mind. Things come up in the mind, insights arise, and you get carried away by the insight instead of asking: What is the mind doing around that insight?

Upasika Kee has a good set of instructions in this area. She says, "Any insight that comes up: Just watch and see what happens next, what happens next. Don't just go running with the insight without noticing what you're doing around the insight." It's only that ability to see what you're doing around the insight—that there's an insight, but here's the mind grabbing on to the insight, a little bit of pride here, a little bit of whatever—that will allow you to drop it. If you see it, you can drop it. If you don't see it, you can't drop it.

Si this principle of looking at yourself, looking at your actions, is very important. It creates harmony in the community and it creates a lot of the good habits you're going to need to really work yourself free. After all, the goal we're aiming at is something that's not an action and it's not a product of an action.

As we noted today, when the Buddha describes the four noble truths, he talks about suffering and the cause of suffering, but he doesn't talk about the cause of the end of suffering. He talks about the path you follow to get there. You can't *cause* the deathless, but you can practice in a way that arrives there. It's your activity, the skillfulness of the mind, that allows you to get there, so this is where you have to keep watching again, and again, and again to see what you're doing that's unskillful. Even around really refined states of concentration, as the Buddha points out, it is possible to get a state of concentration, and your reaction is the wrong one: the pride that you've developed this state that other people haven't been able to develop; that comparing mind, what Ajaan Maha Boowa calls "the fangs of ignorance."

It's one thing to have a sense of accomplishment and of being capable, but that little bit of the mind that starts comparing yourself with other people spoils the benefits you could be getting out of the concentration. It's like those people who are really good looking and are very proud of their good looks: That pride immediately takes something away from their attractiveness.

This is why we have to be restrained, because our eyes keep looking outside. We should try to turn them back in and notice, “Okay, what am I saying, what am I doing, what’s going on right now, what am I thinking?” That’s where all the interesting work is and of course that’s the last place where we tend to look or want to look.

So an important principle in the practice is to turn around and keep looking at yourself—what you’re doing, what you’re saying, what you’re thinking—and look for the results, because that’s where one of our biggest blind-spots is. And yet that’s where the end to suffering can be found.