

The Brightness of Life

June 25, 2011

I was talking today to someone in her eighties who was commenting on how she'd often have a sense of sadness. She was trying to figure out exactly what it was focused on. Part of it was looking at her children and grandchildren, and realizing there was only so much she could do to help them. The other part of it, of course, was seeing all her friends dying, dying, dying. She'd been to a lot of funerals this year.

This often happens to people as they approach the end of life. They look back and say, "Is this all there is?" As you see things slipping more and more out of your control, there doesn't seem to be much left. You think of all the energy and all the effort and all the suffering that went into that, and there's that question, "Is this all there is to it?" Fortunately, the answer is no.

There is a brightness to life. That was Ajaan's Fuang's comment about what he'd gained from his time with Ajaan Lee: Ajaan Lee had shown him the brightness in life. There was something very positive that the human mind can obtain: a happiness that's unconditioned, a happiness that's totally free of any kind of hunger. Most of us live our lives in hunger—not just the physical hunger of the body, but also a mental hunger that always seems unsatisfied. And yet, the Buddha said, there is a happiness that can be obtained through human effort where that hunger is totally satisfied. That's really good news.

The sobering part about it, of course, is that it's going to require a lot of effort on our part. We really have to train our minds. To train the mind means that you have to learn really to look at it. You can't engage in spiritual bypassing. When I was in France, we were trying to translate the term "spiritual bypassing" into French, and my interpreter came up with the idea of "spiritual bridging": trying to bridge your way over your mental issues. In other words, there are a lot of issues that will have to come up in the mind as we meditate, and we can't use the meditation to avoid them. We'll have to deal with them directly. The big issue is the fact that the mind is causing suffering. Its own activities are causing it to suffer — something we don't like to look at. But if you don't look at it directly, there's no way you can get through to the other side.

This is why we practice the path, to give the mind the strengths needed to look at its own activities: to see where it's being ignorant, to see where it's causing all kinds of unnecessary suffering for itself and for others, and learning how not to get upset by it, but at the same time, learning how to get past that habit.

It's important at the very beginning to realize we're doing this for something very positive. I don't know how many times I've heard people depict the Buddha's teachings like this: There really is no happiness in the world, and contentment lies in just admitting that fact and basically giving up on the search for happiness and learning how to be equanimous and unaffected by anything. That's the best that can be expected. There is no transcendent. There's nothing unconditioned. It's just a matter learning how to accept where you are.

That's almost too depressing to think about, if that's what it was all about. But fortunately, it's not.

The Buddha did find an ultimate happiness, one that is totally satisfying—so totally that it's more than anything you could think about, more than anything you could imagine. Can you imagine not hungering? For most of us, just that idea stretches our imagination a lot. We're used to being hungry and we find satisfaction in things that seem to satisfy the hunger, at least for a while. We forget that a lot of the things that are appealing in life are appealing only because we're so hungry that we go after them. This happens as we're alive. This happens as the body dies.

There's still a hunger in the mind that's going to go hungering on for other things; other lifetimes. So we're working toward a happiness where that hunger ends—not because we've simply decided that there really is nothing out there worth feeding on, so we might as well not feed anymore. That doesn't work at all. The hunger is still there. The Buddha's approach was to find a way to put an end to that hunger by totally satisfying it.

So always keep that in mind. There's a very positive thing that we're working toward here. And the human mind and human effort are capable of obtaining it.

To get there, we have deal with the difficult issues that come up in the mind. Nobody likes to look at his or her own greed or aversion, or the times when the mind is being dishonest with itself or keeps falling back on old habits that it knows are unskillful, but keeps going back anyhow. We don't like to look at those things. But if we don't look at them, we're not going to be able to see through them. This is why we try to develop a good, solid state of mind: one that's not going to be budged by anything.

We focus on the breath. We focus on thoughts that are nourishing for the mind, because they give us strength. As long as the mind still feels the need to feed and as long as it's still hungry, let's give it good healthy food: the healthy food of right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, right view—all the right factors that we chanted just now. Right view is what keeps us on course, keeps reminding us that this is the important issue in life: the question of why the mind

is causing suffering and what can be done to put an end to it. It looks at life for the purpose of solving that problem, and divides it into four categories. There's the suffering and then there's the activity that causes the suffering. There are the activities that form a path that would lead us to the end of suffering.

Notice, the Buddha doesn't talk about the "causes" of the end of suffering. He talks about a path going there. It's an important distinction. You can't cause the end of suffering, because the end of suffering is something totally unconditioned. But you can get there through conditioned factors. We focus on the breath. Try to be mindful, as the texts say, of the body in and of itself, or feelings, or the mind, or mental qualities in and of themselves.

As we're focusing on the breath, it's body. But as you're focusing right here on the body, you can't help but be aware of feelings, because they're right there. So try to breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasant feelings. That makes it easier to stay here. And the mind's got to be right there, too. So you try to develop the mental qualities that make it easier for the mind to maintain its focus: mindfulness, alertness, patience, endurance—all the good qualities that need to be brought to bear here.

There are lots of different lists of those qualities. There are the seven factors for awakening. There are the ten perfections. When you see that your mind has trouble settling down, you can ask yourself, "Okay, what's lacking?" The lists are there to give you some ideas. For example, with the factors for awakening, you start with mindfulness, keeping the breath in mind. Then there's analysis of qualities: That's basically analyzing what the problem is. You try to look into the mind and see what's lacking. Or if something good is there, what you can do to maintain it?

That leads immediately to the next quality, which is persistence, i.e., right effort. As we chanted just now, you try to generate the desire to make sure that unskillful qualities don't arise. And you do that by developing skillful qualities. Once unskillful qualities have arisen, what can you do to abandon them, drop them? Because it is important to realize that the mind does have its defilements.

The word *defilement* is one of those words that Western Buddhism tends to shrink away from—as if the mind doesn't have any defilements at all. We don't like the word defilement, but what the Buddha's talking about is something that clouds the mind, makes it impossible to see clearly. And you have to admit: The mind has lots of those. The thing is, we often identify with them: all this stable of the different selves that we have in the mind. The defilements are the unskillful ones, the ones that tend to be very insistent and don't like to listen to the path, don't want to practice the path. They'd rather do things their own way, and yet

they refuse to take responsibility for whatever suffering comes up as a result. They're the irresponsible members of the mind. So you have to recognize that the mind does have those characters, and you've identified with them many times in the past, which is why they hang on.

But you've also got skillful qualities, skillful identities you've assumed in the past. You try to strengthen those. If they haven't arisen, you try to give rise to them. Once they're there, you try to maintain them, develop them.

All this comes under the factor of persistence. When you continue working with the mind in this way, the mind does settle down into concentration. This is where the factors of rapture, serenity, concentration and equanimity come in. In other words, you try to figure out, "What's the problem in the mind right now? What can we do to foster skillful qualities; abandon the unskillful ones?" We just keep working in that direction. The mind will eventually settle down with a sense of stability, with a sense of well-being.

Now, this is not the end of suffering. You've taken the mind to very refined states of concentration, and it's not necessarily the case that you're going to gain insight. It's not automatic. But the fact that you've got the mind settled down like this makes it easier to look at things again in terms of those four noble truths, and to work on the duties that they carry in an even more refined way.

So, it's in this way that right view helps right concentration; right concentration helps right view. This is how we keep digging deeper and deeper into the mind, with a greater sense of fearlessness.

We're going to find some things we don't like in there. But, hey, if we don't face them down, they'll just continue to rule the roost. Do you want that? If you don't, you have to be willing to face them, look them in the eye. This is what concentration is for. It gives you the stability, the sense of well-being, the sense of inner nourishment that you need in order to take your stance and maintain it. This is how the Buddha has you feed yourself on health food for the mind. Otherwise, you're going to go back to your old habits of eating scraps, leftovers; heading down to your mental McDonald's, loading up on all that fat and carbohydrates and salt, whatever. You've got better things to eat here, better foods.

When the mind is well nourished like this, then it can take on all the unskillful qualities that it's allowed to fester. You can look at them carefully for what they are and realize that some of them will go away simply by looking at them. With others, you really have to exert an effort. Try to understand them, to dig around and see: Where are they? It's like having a thorn in your flesh. You can't just pull it out, because it's deeply in there. You've got to take a needle and poke here and

poke there. The poking doesn't necessarily feel good, but if you don't poke right at where the problem is, you're not going to get the thorn out.

Fortunately, it's not all going to be painful. There are a lot of good things that happen on the path as well. You see skillful qualities developing in your mind. The mind is a lot lighter, a lot happier. You can look at your life and not get so weighed down by it.

Ultimately, you do get to the happiness that the Buddha talked about. It's not something especially reserved for people in India two thousand six hundred years ago. It's for anybody who puts the elements and factors of the path together.

That's why, at the end of his life, when the Buddha was asked, "Who in the world is awakened? Which teacher is? Which teacher isn't?" he put the question aside. He said simply that it's a question of the noble eightfold path. Any teaching where you've got the elements of the eightfold path, you're going to have awakened people. So it's a universal teaching. That's one of the meanings of the word *ariya*. We translate it as *noble*, but it also means *standard* or *universal*.

There's something in the West that shrinks away from the idea of universal or absolute or standard truths. Everything is interpretation, they say. But then that statement itself is often presented as a universal truth, and not a very useful one. It has its uses in some ways, but it doesn't lead you to true happiness.

These are the universal truths: the Buddha's four noble truths. These are the universal truths that do lead to true happiness. This is why they're so useful, why they're so important. This is why the Buddha focused on that issue of suffering and the end of suffering as the topic he wanted to teach after his awakening.

Think about it. After his awakening, he could have talked about anything he wanted to. All of his needs had been satisfied. He was no longer hungry. But he realized that this was the topic that was most important to talk about: what the mind is doing to cause itself suffering and how that suffering can be put to an end, because when you focus on that problem, you do away with all the sources of bewilderment in the mind. After all, this is the big bewildering issue is: Why is there suffering?

As little kids, we get totally confused by suffering. Pain happens and we cry, not only because the pain hurts, but also because we have no idea what to do. We don't understand it, and that's scary.

So as we focus on the issue of really comprehending suffering, abandoning its cause, realizing its cessation, and developing the path, it leads to its cessation. The bewilderment goes. The hunger goes. The mind no longer has any needs.

To get to that ultimate happiness, we have to be willing to look at this issue: what we're doing that's causing stress and suffering and how we can learn how to

stop. When you're willing to take that on as a big issue, you find that the ultimate happiness that the Buddha promised really is there.

It's one of the realizations that come with what they call the opening of the Dhamma Eye: The Buddha knew what he was talking about. This really is unconditioned. It really is the end of suffering. There is a brightness to the world. There's a brightness in life. This is where it is. This is why the effort put into the practice is more than repaid when the path reaches its end, when it bears its fruit.