

Practice at Home

April 14, 2013

The practice of Dhamma has its values. You'll encounter some forms of meditation that have tried to strip all the values away, but they're pretty minimalist and don't really go that deep. For the practice to go deep, you have to know the values underlying the practice: a sense of priorities about what's really important in life and what has to be put aside. As the Buddha said, there are many kinds of happiness, but there are some kinds of happiness that can be attained only by abandoning other kinds of happiness.

So you have to make your choice. Where are you going to look for pleasure in life? What *kind* of pleasures, what kind of happiness are you going to look for? What are the things that have to be sacrificed, and what are the things that you sacrifice for? This point becomes especially clear when you're trying to meditate at home, living a householder life. It's not simply a question of trying to find the time to meditate. It's also a question of protecting the values of the practice in an environment that may not necessarily be all that conducive—that's pushing other values at you.

That's the difficult part of practice at home: maintaining your priorities, holding to the principle that the training of the mind is *the* number one issue in life. That has to be your bottom line. Out in the world, the bottom line is how much money you make. You've got to make enough to survive. But then your measure of, "How much is enough?" can get really distorted. There are whole industries out there that are devoted to distorting your idea of how much is enough.

There are times when you have to be willing to take a hit in your income if you're really going to practice the Dhamma. Ajaan Chah has a nice simile. He says wealth that's gained through dishonest means or means that go against the Dhamma is not really wealth. If there's a lot of it, it's just like a lot of gravel. Wealth that's gained through honest means, gained through the practice—sticking with the precepts, sticking with the principles of right livelihood—is genuine wealth. Even though it may be small, it's like small diamonds, small bits of gold. It really does have value. Now, you're not going to hear that idea often in the world out there. But you have to remember that if you took the values of the world out there to their logical extreme, there'd be nothing but oppression, taking advantage of one another.

Ajaan Chah has another interesting simile. He says that if everybody decided that wealth is *the* important thing in life no matter how you get it, then it's possible that someone someday might decide that human skin could fetch a price. You could use skin to make all kinds of interesting things. Then he said, "There'd be nothing to say no. Everybody would be killing one another just to fetch skins to take to sell at the market." His point is that you have to hold to other values that counteract the dominant values out there. This is why I give Dhamma talks for you to listen to, Dhamma books to read, so that even if you're far from a Dhamma community, you have a lifeline. There's a connection.

At the same time, though, it's important to realize that there are some positive values to living with other people. This point applies not only in lay life, but also here at the monastery. There's a famous passage where the Buddha says that by helping yourself, you're helping others. But then he goes on to say that by helping others, you help yourself.

How do you help yourself when you help others? There are four qualities that you want to be working on in helping one another. The first is endurance. You learn to put up with things that are difficult. You learn to put up with restrictions that cannot be changed. That doesn't mean you allow them to defeat you, it simply means you realize, "Okay, what can't be changed?" You've got to work around that. And the amount of effort that goes in to helping other people is one of the perfections. The endurance, the effort: Those are both perfections.

So when you find that situations are difficult and asking more out of you than you would like to give, especially in terms of your energy and time, remember that by giving that extra amount, you're stretching yourself. You're making yourself grow. Those powers of endurance can then be used to be applied to the practice.

The second principle that you get good training in is harmlessness. You decide that in your dealings with other people you're not going to harm anybody. You're not going to break the precepts as you deal with them. You're not going to try to get them to break the precepts. You're going to treat them fairly, and to look for your livelihood in an honest way. This includes not only your dealings with other people, but also with all the pests and other animals that you're going to encounter.

Years back, we were having a discussion up in Laguna Beach. It got around to the precepts and pretty soon, we were talking about how to deal with ants. Someone made a sarcastic remark, "Well, this is a really deep Dhamma discussion we're having tonight about ants." And I replied, "Look, if you can't learn how to treat an ant harmlessly, how can you trust yourself to treat other people harmlessly? How can you trust yourself to treat yourself harmlessly?" The things

that happen in the mind are smaller even than ants, and it's a good lesson that whatever you're going to do, you're not going to harm anybody. You're not going to harm yourself.

Figuring that one out when you're dealing with the back and forth of lay life is a really good test of your discernment. Two further states of mind get developed that way. One is a mind of goodwill, and the other is a mind of sympathy. They're not quite the same. Goodwill is a basic wish for happiness for all beings—for yourself and for others. Sympathy is when you learn how to sympathize with someone else's idea of what's happiness, although it may be foreign to yours. You learn to see things from another person's perspective. In opening yourself up that way, it develops important qualities in the mind.

Those are the four positive things that come from practicing the Dhamma with other people, engaging with other people, whether it's at home or the monastery. You realize that the time you spend here at the monastery working on the chores, the time you spend at home working on your livelihood, being with your family, is all part of Dhamma practice.

We've had people come here and complain that they get less time to meditate here than they would, say, at a meditation retreat where there's nothing *but* meditation. But again, that's a very narrow slice of the practice: what you do when you sit with your eyes closed, what you do when you're doing walking meditation. It's in engaging with other people that you develop some really important qualities.

I know in my own case, looking after Ajaan Fuang when he was sick taught me a lot of Dhamma that I wouldn't have learned otherwise. He tended to fall sick at "inconvenient" times. I'd have other projects going at the monastery and, "Oops! Can't work on that now. I have to look after him." I'd stay up late, late, late at night, and he tended to be really strict with you when he was sick. So dealing with whatever unskillful thoughts were coming up in my mind, just learning how to put them out of my mind and do what needed to be done: All these things were really good lessons in the Dhamma. You don't get them when you're just sitting with your eyes closed on a retreat, or think that your Dhamma practice at home is simply the time that you get to sit and meditate.

It's *all* Dhamma practice if you *make* it Dhamma practice and focus on these four qualities in your relationships. You're going to develop endurance. You're going to develop the ability to be harmless. You're going to develop a mind of goodwill and a mind of empathy. That's how, in helping others, you help yourself.