

Doing the Right Thing

January 21, 2014

During the first year I knew Ajaan Fuang, I was there at the monastery right after the end of the rains retreat, and they were getting ready for the *kathina*. In a dream I had one night, he had a big closet. He went into the closet and came out with a big hat on. Then he went back in the closet, came out, and had another hat on. I looked in the closet, and he had a hat rack with all kinds of hats.

Of course, it's pretty obvious what the dream symbolized. He could take on different tasks and different identities with the ease with which we can put on a hat, take off a hat. And as he told me another time, it didn't come all that easily to him. There were a lot of things he didn't like to do. Especially as a younger monk, he stayed away from construction work and tended to look down on the monks who were getting involved in construction work—until one time around 1955–56.

Ajaan Lee was planning his celebration of 25 centuries of Buddhism, because 1957 was the year 2,500 in the Buddhist calendar. He was talking one night about the plans of having to build shelters for all the people who were going to come. He turned to Ajaan Fuang and said, "If you don't help me with this, I'm going to die." That's when Ajaan Fuang realized he was going to have to learn how to be a construction monk, too, among other things. And as he consoled himself, even if he were to die with a hammer and a saw in his hand, he'd still be dying with something skillful.

The lesson here, of course, is that if your idea of yourself gets in the way of doing something skillful, you're making things needlessly complicated. That's so much of what the Buddha's teachings are about: learning to develop skillful qualities in the mind—which means learning to do skillful things in your thoughts, words and deeds, and learning how to abandon unskillful ones. In fact, he said that was one of his categorical teachings.

There are only two categorical teachings in Buddhism. One is the skillful qualities should be developed, and unskillful ones abandoned. The other is the four noble truths, and the two teachings are connected. You look in the mind to see what you're doing that's creating suffering. You realize that it's the craving and ignorance that you're doing. We don't think of these as actions, but they are. We tend to think of them as qualities that kind of hover around the mind like a cloud, but they're choices that we make again and again. But now we want to make other choices—in other words, to act in a more skillful way by developing the path that leads to the end of suffering.

So throughout the Canon, the Buddha says to simplify things by boiling them down to actions. What are you doing right now? What do you expect out of what you're doing? What

do you want out of what you're doing? What's the best thing to want in terms of your long-term welfare and happiness?

Sometimes we have trouble seeing what the right thing is simply because our minds are too frazzled, running around too much. And sometimes we actually see what would be the right thing to do, the skillful thing to do, but we don't have the strength or the discernment to actually do it.

So there are three problems: one, not seeing clearly; two, not having the strength even when you do see clearly; and sometimes, you can see clearly and have the strength, but you don't have the wisdom to deal with the unskillful members of your mind's committee.

Boil it down to those three issues, and the training that the Buddha gives in virtue, concentration, and discernment helps right here. Virtue writes in very large terms: Okay, these are certain actions that you just don't do, regardless. They're never going to be skillful. Even though they may seem to be to your advantage in the short term, they're really going to harm you in the long term. This is good to know so that you don't have to keep reinventing the Dhamma wheel every time you try to make a choice. You don't kill; you don't steal; you don't have illicit sex; you don't lie; you don't take intoxicants. Period. Those are the big fences the Buddha puts around us to protect us.

Then to help the mind see clearly, we practice concentration and get the mind to settle down and be still for a while. You do whatever it takes to get the mind to settle down. This involves some discernment in noticing where the mind is obstreperous, or what it's hanging on to so that it won't settle down. You can figure out some way to let it go—whatever that issue is. When the mind finally does settle down, you can be still. At least for a while, you can step out of your thought-worlds and all the conversations that you normally engage with in the mind. It helps you gain your bearings. You get perspective.

Simply because the mind has been still for a while, when you pick up an issue, sometimes you can see right through it—in the same way that, if you've been riding around in a car and everything's a blur, you stop and get out of the car, and you begin to see clearly: "Oh!" Before everything was a blur and a movement, but now you see that some things are still and some things are moving, and you can detect the more subtle movements because you're standing still.

This is the goose, as I said earlier today, that lays the golden egg. Take good care of the goose, and it'll keep laying golden eggs. When you get the mind to be still, protect it, and you'll be able to see things a lot more clearly. Things that should have been obvious but weren't because you were preoccupied with something else, suddenly do become clear.

As for the insights you gain: You've got to ask yourself, "Is this something that I can apply right now?" If so, just do it. We can't guarantee that everything you see when the mind is still is going to be the way it is, or is going to be true. But the fact that the mind is still usually gives a much better chance of seeing what's actually helpful, what's actually skillful.

If the insight is not something that applies right away—if it's an insight that has to do with the rest of your life—this is where you practice mindfulness. See if you can keep it in mind. Tuck it away some place in your memory. Keep it ready to pull out. The easiest way to pull it out is to get the mind still again. Otherwise, if you go around just holding something in mind all the time, you're going to be missing other issues that may be coming up. But if you can say, "Okay, this is something really important," make a mental note, keep the mind still for a while, then it'll be more accessible the next time you get the mind still again. And if it's not there after you leave concentration, maybe it wasn't that important to begin with.

That's how the concentration helps you to see clearly, and how it gives you some insight already just in learning how to wrestle the mind down to get still. You've learned some things about your mind right there.

Then there's the issue of strength, and the concentration helps here, too. When you can breathe in a way that feels good and you have a sense of well-being at the different breath centers in the body, that gives you a lot more nourishment so that you're not hungry all the time. A lot of the reason we do stupid things is because we want a quick fix right now. We can't wait for the well-being that comes by acting for the long term. We want a good short-term fix, and we end up suffering, of course, in the long term. The reason we do that is because the mind is hungry; it's weak. So you practice concentration to feed it and give it more strength.

But the concentration on its own is not going to solve the problem because there's that other issue: that we have some unskillful ways of behaving, and the mind has lots of reasons for continuing to behave that way. This is where you need to develop your discernment. Part of it is what I said earlier, just clearing the decks by asking questions about actions rather than about what kind of person you are. Are you the kind of person who wears big hats? Are you the kind of person who wears small hats? Do you wear the conductor's hat? Do you wear the chef's hat? Is that hat getting in the way? Forget about the hats for the time being, and just look at what needs to be done right now. What's the purpose of this action? What's the purpose of that action? And do you really expect that it's going to get those results? If not, you can change.

The other way to develop your discernment is through a factor in right effort called generating the desire to abandon what's unskillful and to develop what's skillful. This is where you talk yourself into doing things that you may not want to do, but you *know* are in your own interest. Or you talk yourself out of doing things that you may like to do, but you know are not in your own self-interest.

One of the primary ways the Buddha gives of generating desire is trying to be heedful—in other words, realizing that your actions are important. They do shape your life. And every good intention, every good action, is a step in the right direction. If you don't make steps in the right direction, you're going to go in the wrong direction. You can't just sit here and say, well, things are just going to pass by, pass by, and it doesn't matter what I do. What you do does shape

things, and sends them in a particular direction. What kind of shape do you want things to be? In what direction do you want to go?

One trick for developing heedfulness that I find works pretty well is to imagine yourself on your deathbed, looking back on this part of your life—especially when you're faced with an important decision. Which is the decision that you would tell yourself, "I'm really glad I did that," or, "I'm really glad I acted on that insight or that understanding"? You don't want to lead a life that you look back on and you say, "Oh my gosh, it was a total waste." Time is precious. We don't know how much we have, but we do have right now. So make right now a skillful choice.

Another quality that helps to generate desire is compassion—compassion for yourself and for other people around you. Our actions have the power to make the difference between pain and suffering on the one hand, and happiness and pleasure on the other. Wouldn't it be good to do the action, say the word, or think the thought that leads to well-being? Don't you want to be happy? Don't you want others to be happy?

Another way of motivating yourself to do the skillful thing is having a sense of pride. Here you are a human being, you've met the Buddha's teachings, and you've had a chance to practice. This means that you've done some good in your past, and that's something to be proud of. You'd be ashamed to slip back. Sometimes we hear about shame as being a debilitating emotion, but that's when it's not conjoined with pride. Healthy pride is the kind of pride that says, "Look. I've practiced here. I've learned some good things. I've got some good to me. I'm a principled person. That kind of action is a waste. Why should I do it? It would be embarrassing to even think about it." And that can help.

These are just a few ideas about how you generate desire to develop right effort. You want to get to know your own mind to figure out what motivates you to get out of bed and do the right thing and what motivates you to abandon the wrong thing. Concentration here is to help you see clearly and to have the strength to do the right thing once you've decided you can do it. But you've probably learned from experience that your mind has lots of different voices that get in the way. So try to be quiet and watch them to see where their weak spots are. That's where you can get around them with your discernment. You've got to think strategically.

Don't let the fact that there are all these unskillful voices in your mind get you down. Everybody has them. We've all given in to them at one point or another. This is where recollection of the Sangha is helpful. You read the stories of the elder monks and nuns and how really bad their meditation got in some cases. A couple of them were getting suicidal, but then they were able to turn themselves around. Try to develop the thought that "If they can do it, I can do it." That's a skillful form of pride. Eventually, you won't have any need for it when you've reached the end of the path, but you use whatever you can to keep yourself on the path.

There's a story in the book *Arctic Dreams* about an Eskimo family that were on an ice floe that suddenly split off from the larger ice shelf where the other igloos in their village were. They

were swept away in the ocean. Everybody else in the village assumed that they had died, but a year later, they showed up. They had landed some place else. They didn't have the kind of trees they were used to, and they didn't have the kind of animals they were used to. So they had to fashion kayaks and new clothing and everything out of substandard materials—at least, substandard as they saw them. But they were able to make their way back.

When they drew up to the village, the first thing they did was to laugh about how substandard their kayaks, their clothing and everything else were because they didn't have the ideal materials to make them. But it's what enabled them to survive. They thought strategically.

So if other people are saying you're holding on to something, that doesn't matter. You hold on to good things—what works—because you want true happiness. And you don't want to let any unskillful voices, inside or out, get in the way.