

The Power of Action

January 19, 2015

There's a question that the Buddha recommends that the monks ask themselves every day, and it's a good question for anyone who practices to ask him or herself: "What am I becoming as days and night fly past, fly past?" As Ajaan Fuang once said, suppose the Buddha were standing in front of you right now, asking you that question. How would you answer? Would you be able to say, "I'm becoming concentrated, I'm seeing things more clearly," or if things weren't going well in the mind, "I'm fighting them." At the very least, you want to be able to say, "I'm fighting things that are not going well." Don't be the sort of person who gives up and allows the defilements just to step over your head and defeat you entirely. If your mind can't settle down, try to figure out why. Have some fighting spirit.

It may seem strange that the Buddha would have you ask yourself, "What kind of person am I becoming?" after all we hear that this is about not becoming anything or becoming nobody, but what he hear is not the case. The Buddha taught that we can use our sense of self as what he calls a governing principle—in other words, something that keeps us on the path.

An important part of our self, of course, is composed of the narratives we can tell about how we've behaved. So what kind of narrative do you have as a meditator? What kind of narrative do you have in your life? We all start out with difficulties, we all start out with setbacks, some of us have a more difficult time than others, but we have the choice: Are we going to be the kind of people who let the difficulties overcome us or are we going to be the kind of people who overcome them? That's a story that we can create through our actions.

In the Buddhist texts, you've got the stories of the Buddha's awakening, the things he did that led up to his awakening: the various problems he encountered and how he got past them. The same for the monks and the nuns: They tell their stories. And, again, people have said that it sounds peculiar. In a religion that has teachings on not self, teachings on emptiness, why all this concern with

autobiography? It's because the basic teaching is not not-self and it's not emptiness. The basic teaching is kamma. These are stories that show the power of kamma—that circumstances can be bad, but you look at what you're doing to make the circumstances bad so that you can change what you're doing and make them better. The Buddha gives examples: This is how it's done. And it's a good story.

I know a monk who has lots of adventures in the forest in Thailand, and sometimes I wonder if he's having the adventures so that he'll have good stories to tell afterwards. It's not a bad motivation, because it gives you a strong sense of how you are in charge. You're the one who gets to write the story through your actions. Of course, you want to be able to tell a true story so you really have to do things that you can talk about. But whether or not you talk about them to other people, you can talk about them to yourself and you can gain a sense of encouragement: "I used to have these difficulties and those problems, but now I've got past them." That's an important part of having a strong sense of the power of your actions, that they really do make a difference.

We live in a world, as the Buddha said, that's an uneven world, a world that's out of tune. The Pali word here, *sama*, is a really interesting term. It's applied to roads that are even. *Visama* is uneven. It's also applied to musical instruments. If the instrument is *sama*, it's in tune; if it's *visama*, it's out of tune. And here, being "in tune" and "out of tune," when the Buddha applies these terms to actions, relates to an image that you see in a lot of ancient cultures: that a musical instrument in tune is a good analogy for the kind of person you want to be and the kind of actions you want to have that are in tune with the principles of nature, in tune with the principles of what's skillful and what's not.

As we practice, we often find ourselves trying to act in an in-tune way in an out-of-tune world. It's not just today that this is the situation. That was the situation back in the Buddha's time, too.

So you think about the precepts, you think about his teachings on concentration and discernment, and you want to be in tune with those. You want to be in tune also with the stories you hear of the monks and the nuns and other people who have been successful in the practice. They give you an idea: This is how

it's done, this is the kind of life you live, this is the kind of person you become. One of the qualities that's true across the board is that they become really solid people, with a very strong sense of what's right and what's wrong, what's skillful and what's not skillful. They have a sense of shame around behaving in an unskillful way, which is the obverse side of having the sense of honor and self-esteem that comes when you've behaved in a good way.

So this is a teaching that measures us by our actions. It doesn't measure us by our background or how we look or any of those things that the world tends to measure us by. Think of the forest ajaans: They all came from a very poor part of Thailand, many of them from very poor families, and if you looked at them from the outside you'd say, "These people don't have a chance." But they made themselves, they made the chance, through their actions. They made themselves into something really special—not that they went around talking about how special they were, but I'm sure a good part of the practice was having that sense "I'd be ashamed to tell other people that I just sat there and did nothing when I was meditating. I let the defilements run all over me." At the very least, as Ajaan Maha Boowa says, you want to have a fighting spirit. Even if it means losing in the beginning, it's better than not fighting at all.

So we're practicing here to help ourselves gain the strength needed to act in an honorable way, to act in a way that's in tune with the Buddha's teachings. We're trying to still the mind so that we can see our actions. The fact that this is a central issue is something you see all over in the Canon. When people asked about what the Buddha taught, the monks would say, "He's a teacher of kamma—a *kamma-vadi*, someone who teaches kamma. When monks from other sects were coming to ask to ordain, the first question was, "Are you a kamma-vadi, too? Or do you not believe in the power of action?" If you didn't believe in the power of action, you'd be put on probation. The non-kamma-vadi group also included monks who taught that there was no self. So it's the action that's important—your understanding of action and your ability to use that understanding to do something skillful.

So the question is not what you are. Sometimes you hear that the teaching is that once you understand who you are, that you're interconnected with all beings,

and there's no real you there or whatever, then you'll naturally act in a skillful way. The Buddha never said that. He said you have to understand action first by following the precepts and watching yourself as you follow the precepts because they allow you to see when you're going off the path. It's very clear. These are dos and don'ts that you take on not because you're just obeying somebody, but because you learn about yourself by taking them on. Again, they help you see the power of action.

Similarly when you do concentration: You're going to stay with the breath and you're not going to let your mind wander around all over the place where it likes, just noting this and noting that and not really having a good place to settle down. Having a place to settle down is what allows you to see, "Ah, the mind's moved," and you bring it back. And once again, you bring it back. Sometimes it's discouraging in the beginning because the mind seems to be moving off every place but the breath. But if you're persistent, give yourself pep talks, and remind yourself of times when you dealt with difficulties in the past and were able to overcome them, then you can see that here's another example of how you can do that. And you'll have a good story to tell. If you're not telling other people, you can tell yourself, "That was the night that things finally settled down."

It's not going to happen by allowing things to wander around all over the place. It'll happen when you really work on it. Because in getting the mind to settle down like this, you have a good default mode, a good sense that this is the way things should be. When they go off the default, you notice that something's wrong, something needs to be looked into.

This is why concentration is such a good foundation for discernment. Otherwise, how are you going to know your defilements unless you see them move? You're not going to see them move if you're not still.

So all of these teachings point to the importance of action. When the practice gets to the stage of looking at yourself and taking on the teachings of self and not self, that, too, is teaching on action. You see your sense of self as something you do, as something you put together. And you ask yourself, "Which things do I want to identify with and which things not?" You've got the choice. It's not as if you're stuck with some sort of conventional self and you want to get rid of it. You've got

a self that you've been creating—you've got many selves, actually, that you've been creating—and you want to ask yourself, "Are these skillful or not?" You have to be able to step back and see them as actions. As for the sense of self that encourages you on the path, that's the self as a governing principle. That's one you want to keep in your stable for a long time. As for the others, you can set them out to pasture when you can see that they're no longer useful. Those are the ones that you brand as "not self." Again, you have the choice to identify or not identify. These are actions. Then as your mind gets more still, you begin to see these actions in more and more subtle forms.

Of course, ultimately we're working to a point where, as Ajaan Mun says, nibbana has no action. Each of the four noble truths has a duty, but nibbana doesn't have a duty. There's no action there at all. But you get there through acting skillfully and looking very carefully at your actions. And to act, you need strength. This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration, but it's also one of the reasons why we try to live a really moral life, why we try to live evenly in an uneven world, or in tune in a world that's out of tune. Because that gives us strength and it gives strength to our actions.

So what you're becoming right now is an important question. Are you becoming concentrated? Okay, good. Are you becoming clearer? That's good. If you're not, are you working at becoming concentrated and clearer? If yes, that's good, too. That way, if the Buddha were to come and ask you, you'd be able to give him an answer you'd be proud to give. That kind of pride is not a defilement.