

Time Well Spent

June 29, 2015

The Pali word for meditation, *bhavana*, is the same word that's used for what you do with the whole path. Everything from right view down to right concentration: These are all things you develop. They're all aspects of training the mind, and you want your training to be complete.

I was reading recently about a meditation store, which is a scary idea—it sells one or two little techniques and that's it, just those little techniques. As all too often happens when you privatize something, you end up with less than you had before.

You want your training to be complete if you want to really get the benefit of what the Buddha had to teach—and it covers everything. During the time when I was in Thailand, the training Ajaan Fuang gave covered everything from learning how to wipe a floor; how to clean a spittoon; on up to how to walk properly on a hut that was built on stilts; how to speak; how not to speak; what to do; what not to do; how to pay attention to things; how to get a sense of time and place. Ajaan Fuang told me when I went back to stay with him, “It's not just a matter of sitting with your eyes closed, it's everything. You want to do *everything* skillfully.”

That distinction between skillful and unskillful is one of the most basic in the Buddha's teachings—it's one of the two teachings that he said are categorical. And it wasn't just the distinction between the two, it was also that skillful actions should be developed and unskillful ones should be abandoned. In other words, the categorical teaching not only tells you something about which actions were skillful and unskillful, but also tells you that there's a duty, an imperative. It's in following the imperative that you actually develop discernment.

So as you practice, try to look at *everything* as an opportunity for training the mind. When you're doing chores around the monastery, it's an opportunity to train a lot of good qualities, such as persistence, endurance, and determination. You make up your mind you're going to do a project and you see it through. There's equanimity when things don't go well—but it's not the kind of equanimity that just gives up. It's the kind where, if you have to make a retreat, it's a strategic retreat, so that when things get better, conditions get better, you can continue with your work. All the perfections get developed as part of the path.

Then there's speech: One of Ajaan Fuang's first lessons to me: “Before you say anything at all, ask yourself, ‘Is this necessary?’ If it's not, don't say it.” I found that cut out a *lot* of speech. As he said, “If you can't control your mouth,

how are you going to control your mind?” All the time spent in chatter in the course of the day just fills your mind up with all kinds of chatter inside. You sit here talking to yourself, and it’s hard enough trying to just talk to yourself about the breath, talk to yourself about getting the mind to be with the breath, but if a lot of other topics have been brought up during the course of the day that are not related to the Dhamma, they’re going to ricochet around inside your mind and make it that much harder to settle down.

The habits of speech you develop with your mouth are very closely related to the habits of speech you have in the mind, sitting here talking to yourself. After all, directed thought and evaluation are what help you decide what you’re going to say out loud, and directed thought and evaluation are what you’re trying to practice here as you meditate. So direct your thought to worthwhile things, evaluate them in a way that actually leads to abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful ones. This way, the mind has a chance to settle down, to be its own person, to have its own space.

The world is full of things that want to invade our space, and it’s not like we’re fending them off in our normal lives. When we’re out there, we turn on the devices; we want to see; want to check the emails all the time; we want to check this; check that; be in touch. But be in touch with what? You’re being in touch with other people who are being in touch. Who’s doing any independent thinking? Who’s having any chance to be introspective, to look inside the mind and gain some insights as to what’s going on?

When you come to a place like this, you want to cut down all those connections as much as possible. We have a certain amount of connection here—the fact that we have to take care of the chores around the monastery—but let it be just that. Another instruction from Ajaan Fuang is, “When you do your work, you do your work; when you’re done with your work, you go back, you be by yourself”.

When I was staying at Wat Asokaram, I was away from Ajaan Fuang for a while, another piece of advice was that when people came and asked me questions in English, he told me to answer in Thai; when they asked questions in Thai, he told me to answer them in English. As he said, “After a while, they’ll get tired of talking to you.” So when things have to be discussed, you discuss them and that’s it. Otherwise, the day gets frittered away—and your mind gets frittered away as well. You try to sit down and meditate and it’s still reverberating with the topics it talked about.

So even while you’re with other people, working on jobs, the speech should be limited just to what’s absolutely necessary to get the job done well, make things go smoothly; but otherwise you want to be in touch with your breath at all times. Make your practice *akaliko*—timeless. If we want to see a timeless Dhamma in our practice, but our day is chopped up in to little times—“now

this is the time to talk, this is the time to work, this is the time to take a bath, this is the time to eat”—that’s all you get: little, tiny, chopped-up times. But if you can say, “The time to work is the time to be with the breath, the time to talk is the time to be with the breath, the time to eat, the time to...whatever: It’s time to be with the breath,” that creates a continuous thread. This ability to make up your mind to stick with one thing, to keep your attention focussed on one thing: That’s what gives your practice momentum.

William James had an interesting observation. He said that all good things that the mind can do come back to this ability to just keep the mind coming back, coming back, coming back to what it wants to focus attention on. So try to have a continuous attention, try to have a continuous practice, developing your attention. Mindfulness is an essential to that in the sense of keeping something in mind. You keep in mind that you’ve got the breath here, you keep in mind the fact that you want to relate to it skillfully: That’s the thread that ties everything together. When the practice is continuous, it builds up momentum. Otherwise it just gets chopped up in stops and starts and stops and starts, like rush-hour traffic, and it lacks the strength, it lacks the *positive* power of inertia.

For most of us, inertia means just sitting still, but when something is moving, inertia means that it keeps on moving—so try to get *that* kind of inertia going in your practice. You benefit, and your presence actually becomes a help to other people. As the Buddha said, one of the most important external influences in your practice is admirable friendship—having people who are good examples, and setting a good example yourself. So your practice here is not an interference with other people’s practice. It actually helps smooth things along, move things ahead.

So look at every in-and-out breath as an opportunity to practice. As the Buddha said, that’s the sign of someone who’s heedful. He once asked the monks how they practiced mindfulness of death. One of the monks said, “I think about death once a day.” Another monk said, “I think about it twice a day...three times a day.” He finally got to one monk who said, “While I’m eating, I think, ‘May I live long enough to swallow this bite of food, I’d be able to do a great deal in the practice.’” Another one said, “I think when I breathe in, ‘May I live long enough to continue this breath, it’ll give me an opportunity to do something with the practice.’” The Buddha said it was only those last two monks who really counted as heedful.

Death is always there. When the Buddha’s talking about the importance of being with the present moment, it’s not just, “hang out in the present moment because it’s a nice spot.” It’s always in connection with mindfulness of death. There’s work to be done. The mind has to be trained. How much time do you have? You don’t know. Things in the body can creep up on you. The signs of

death are there all the time, it's just that they're hidden—we hide them from our view—but if you keep them in mind, then you realize, “I've got this breath. What's the best use of this breath? And then this breath and this breath.”

When you give them value in this way, then they reward you. The practice builds momentum, so that if for some reason beyond your control it gets cut off, you have no regrets.

They had that ad campaign years ago about the “No Regrets” jeans where they got people who had been misbehaving to advertise their jeans. But if you genuinely want to have no regrets, it has to be the ability to look back on your own way of dealing with your own mind—there's nothing to regret; your way of dealing with other people—there's nothing to regret. Often when people get in to the ‘no regret’ mode, it's just denial. But here you want to have no regrets and no denial at all. You want to look back on your time and say, “This was time well spent.” And you do that by spending it wisely each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out.