

## *Willing to Question Yourself*

*July 6, 2015*

The Buddha talks about the stages in learning the Dhamma. First you have to find someone you trust, because the Dhamma isn't just words. It's primarily a quality of the heart. The essence of the Dhamma is awakening, which is a quality of the heart. We have words to point to it. But it's not about words. So you want to look for a person who has that kind of quality.

Then, as the Buddha said, you draw nearer to that person and you listen. You lend ear. You listen carefully. Try to remember the Dhamma. All the while you're sitting here meditating, just let the Dhamma come past you. If there's any point that's relevant to what you're doing right now, it'll stick in your mind. You don't want the Dhamma talk to get in the way of your concentration. If you pick up something that strikes you as relevant to what you're doing, there is a process where you have to think it through. Try to figure out what it means, how it fits in with the Dhamma that you already know. As the Buddha said, when things fit together, that's when you gain a desire to practice the Dhamma. The fact that things are coherent is not a proof that they're true, but it certainly is encouraging.

You have a willingness. In other words, not only do you want to practice the Dhamma, but you're also willing to submit yourself to what the training requires. Some of the things are pleasant. Some of the things are not so pleasant. And we as individuals have different needs. Some people, as the Buddha said, are going to have a pleasant practice. Others will have an unpleasant practice. The unpleasant practice, of course, is the contemplation of the body. It's something we all have to do, but some of us need it more than others.

Think about the various parts of the body. What have you got here? Think of all the issues in the world that concern you: the safety of your body, the nourishment of the body, the fact that you have to create shelter for the body. We've been seeing a number of huts go up recently, along with walking meditation path covers. Without those things, we would die or we'd really suffer quite a lot. The body has a lot of needs. But then you look at the body in and of itself, and it's not anything that's all that valuable.

I was reading one of Ajaan Funn's Dhamma talks recently, and he was talking about all these things in the body that you have to throw away. Things come out of the body. You have to throw them away. There's very little that we keep. A child comes out, okay, keep that. But even when the child comes out, it's pretty disgusting. Back in Ayutthaya in Thailand, there was kind of a health unit, I guess

you'd call it, where a nurse was in charge. I knew the family of the nurse, and I happened to visit the unit right after she'd presided over a birth. The stench that came out of the room was overwhelming. I thought, "Gee, when I came out of my mother's womb, did I smell that bad as well?" We all smelled pretty bad. But everything else that comes out of the body, you've just got to throw away. And as for the babies coming out, you have to clean them up.

Then, after all that, the body grows old and it's going to die whether you want it to or not. It doesn't ask permission. So much of our lives are dependent on this thing that can die on us at any moment. We have to keep contemplating this again and again because we're so attached to the body, and the issues of the body loom so large in our minds. It requires a certain amount of desire and willingness to submit to this kind of practice. It's something you have to do again and again and again.

Ajaan MahaBoowa talks about how you can't count the number of times you do it. Sometimes it does seem like it isn't having any effect, but as you chip, chip, chip away at your attachment to the body, it eventually wears through though. The Buddha's image is the handle of a hammer. You use the hammer every day, every day, every day and you notice that the hammer's wearing down a little bit—especially the hammers in the old days when the handles were made out of wood. You can't measure how much it's worn down in a day, but you know that over time, it will wear down.

So there are some practices we have to be willing to submit to. The practice has to go against our desires. All of us would like to have a pleasant practice, but that's nothing we can determine in advance. You have to gauge your own mind. You have to gauge your own practice to see what you need.

Then, following the willingness, there's what the Buddha calls comparing. In other words, you compare your state of mind to what he talks about. We're all familiar with the passage in the Kalama Sutta where the Buddha says that you should subject teachings to question: This teaching, when you put into practice, does it lead to what is blameworthy or does it lead to what is blameless?

We notice that the Buddha encourages us again and again to ask questions about the teaching so that we can understand exactly where it's aiming and see where it's going. This connects with a word that's often paired with Dhamma in Pali: *attha*, which means "meaning," but also means "purpose" and "benefit." What's the benefit of this teaching? What, when you put into practice, will give you good results? What will give you results that you really don't want? That's how you test the teachings. That's how you question the teachings.

But at the same time, you have to let the teachings question you. Where is your state of mind right now? How do you measure up against the Buddha's descriptions, say, of right concentration, right mindfulness, right effort? That's what the word "comparing" means there. As you compare your mind with the Dhamma, you see that you're lacking here and you're lacking there. You don't take that as a reason to get depressed or discouraged. You just say, "This is what needs to be done," because, after all, this is the way to find true happiness.

Although we tend to dither around quite a lot in the matter of true happiness, there comes a point when you realize: There's nothing else that's really worth going for. With all the other things in the world, when you pursue them, you can put a lot of energy into them and the results are not worth the effort that went into it. But this is something that really is worth the effort. It's just that it may take a lot more effort than you're prepared for in the beginning. But the whole point of the practice is to make you stronger so that you are capable of doing this.

Once you've compared yourself, you get more and more motivated to actually do the practice, and that's when, as the Buddha says, you learn to touch the Dhamma with the body. In other words, where you've got your experience of the body right here, right now, is where you're going to experience the deathless. It's not a bodily thing, but it's at the body in terms of the centeredness of your awareness. It's nothing out there that you have to search someplace else. You look inside and you find that you touch this other dimension here inside.

So if the practice isn't going well, ask yourself. Which of these stages are you missing? That stage of comparing is important. That's where you ask questions.

In the beginning, you ask questions to learn what the Dhamma means, but here's where you begin to ask questions about yourself: "What am I doing? How does it measure up against the standards that I've learned, and how do I apply those standards to my particular case?" These are questions that are worth asking. "How can I bring my practice into line?" If the desire's strong enough, and your willingness is strong enough, you'll find a way.

Ajaan Fuang talked a lot about using your ingenuity. In other words, you get general instructions, but this is not a factory where you just put everything into the factory and it's all going to come out as hotdogs, regardless of what you put into the mixture. It's not a mechanical process. It's a process of doing and gauging the results and then doing again and gauging the results again, as with the questions that the Buddha told the Kalamas to ask: "What when I put into practice, is actually going to give rise to results that are skillful; results that are blameless?"

You start with questions and then you move in to focus on your breath. What way of relating to the breath is going to be helpful? How do you relate to the breath in a way that allows the mind to settle down? How do you perceive the breath—in other words, what are the images you hold in mind about what’s happening when you breathe? What kind of breathing feels good? What kind of breathing is easy for the mind to stay with? These are questions you have to ask. Nobody else can ask them for you. It’s in asking these questions and finding answers: That’s how you learn to develop your discernment.

Discernment isn’t an automatic process, just saying that everything is inconstant, stressful, and not-self, and getting to the point where you say, “Oh yes, yes, yes. I agree.” That’s not what the Buddha’s asking you to do. He’s asking you to apply those ideas to whatever comes up. See: Is this worth holding on to? Some things are inconstant, but they are worth holding on to, at least for the purpose of the path. Other things are not.

The Buddha was like a doctor, in that his course of treatment for the disease of suffering is very much like a doctor’s approach. Try to comprehend the disease, comprehend the symptoms so that you can find the cause. Once you find the cause, you abandon it. You do that by developing the path. That’s like taking your medicine so that you can achieve true health. The path is like a doctor’s path. Some things that a doctor recommends are things that even after the disease has gone away, you’re going to have to continue doing. In other words, some of the things we develop on the path are things that will provide a comfortable abiding even after the path has reached its goal: things like virtue, mindfulness, concentration, and right view.

Then there are other things that you use for the purpose of the path: certain attachments; certain desires. Even craving and conceit: There’s a role for them on the path, too. A certain sense of self that’s competent: That’s also something you want to maintain—the sense of self that’s heedful, that can say No to certain desires because you know they’ll give bad results down the line, and say Yes to others that’ll give good results. These are qualities of a healthy self. These are things that you do have to encourage.

And so it requires a certain amount of discernment to figure out what kind of selfing is helpful now and what kind is not. Seeing that your sense of self as an activity helps a lot, because then you can say, “This is like any kind of karma. Certain things are good to do all the time. Other things are not good to do at any time. Other things are good sometimes and not at other times.” Your sense of self is like that third kind of action.

Certain kinds of self are things you want to get rid of as quickly as you can. Others you want to encourage because they'll help you along the path. And then others can be programmed into kind of a franchise meditation.

Each person has to develop his or her own discernment as you answer these questions. Ask them first and then answer them. Realize there are very few pat answers. Some things that are categorically true. Skillful behavior in thought, word, and deed is something to be developed all the time. Unskillful behavior is something to be abandoned all the time.

But then you get down to the details, and that's where you have to develop your discernment. You ask questions. You learn how to ask the right questions—and then test the answers.

So it's a process of questioning, knowing what kinds of questions to ask; what answers will really be satisfactory. If you don't question the path, it just doesn't move. It doesn't develop.

So try to bring a curious attitude to the path. You hear the Buddha saying that the end of suffering is possible, something that goes beyond our ordinary ken. If you find the possibility intriguing, he's got a course of practice for you to follow. You look at it and it makes sense, so try to develop the desire and the willingness to do what needs to be done, because no one else can do it for you. And if you don't do it now, when will you do it? You've got the opportunity now. The world's relatively stable. Who knows how much longer that's going to last? Try to be heedful and curious with every in-and-out breath.