

## *Appropriate Attention*

*November 21, 2015*

Ajaan Suwat would sometimes take note of the fact that there are a lot of things in your experience that the Buddha tells you to say are not-self. You apply the perception of not-self to your body. As he said, your body isn't yours, and your loved ones aren't yours either, really. This perception goes out to cover a lot of other things, too. And of course in the mind, your feelings, your perceptions, thought constructs, even your consciousness: These things not really yours. But then there's that passage we chant often—"I am the owner of my actions." That, Ajaan Suwat said, is one area where you don't want to apply the perception of not-self too early. Because what you're doing makes the difference between whether you're creating the cause of suffering or putting together the path to its end, you've got to be responsible for that. There are choices you make. They don't just happen on its own. It's not the case that you naturally just watch things, and everything goes into the path. Sometimes you can watch things and they turn into something else entirely.

You've got to make choices. You see this in so many of the teachings, as when the Buddha talks about the qualities you bring to mindfulness and concentration: mindfulness—keeping something in mind; alertness—watching what you're doing; and then ardency—putting your whole heart in doing it well. Notice that alertness here is not just being aware of the present moment. We've got consciousness in the present moment all the time. Whether we're paying attention to that or paying attention to something else, the consciousness in the present moment is here. Alertness is more focused. It's focused on what you're doing, either outside or inside the mind—because that's what makes all the difference.

So we're here not because the present moment is a wonderful moment, but because there's work to be done in this moment. And the work that makes the difference is done right here. Know and figure out what to do—in other words, figure out what the duty of ardency is.

Then there's another quality that lies in the background: appropriate attention. It asks the questions: "What's skillful? What's not skillful?" And from there it goes into something implied by those questions. In other words, if something's skillful, it's going to be a skillful cause that leads to a desirable result; an unskillful cause leads to an undesirable result. Right there you've got the framework for the four noble truths. As the Buddha explains appropriate

attention many, many times, that's the framework that's applied: the four noble truths and their duties. We chanted the *Dhamma-cakka*, the Dhamma Wheel, the other night. You notice the part that's the wheel, which is the heart of the sutta where the Buddha talks about knowing each truth and then knowing the duty with regard to the truth and then knowing that you've completed it. Appropriate attention is a matter of the first two levels of knowledge there—knowing what the truth is, and then knowing what the duty is. Ardency is what tries to bring about that third level.

So how do you use appropriate attention to apply the four noble truths?

You look at things in terms of what you're doing and the results of what you're doing. If the results are leading to stress, okay, you're doing something unskillful. You might want to look into what you're doing and see if you can change it. There's going to be desire on both sides: the desires that lead to suffering and the desires that help get the path together. So you can't just say, "Well, I give up desires." You have to figure out: What kind of desire is it? Is it a desire that should be encouraged? Or is it a desire that should be discouraged?

To see that, you've got to get the mind really quiet. There's no way you're going to be able to apply these teachings with a lot of detail unless the mind is very quiet. You can start out in the beginning, looking at things that are obviously stressful, and ask yourself, "Why do I have to keep doing this?" Sometimes it's out of the force of habit. Sometimes there's even a sense that you *should* be weighing the mind down in certain ways. Other times, it's more for entertainment. You have to sort out: What are the reasons for doing something that leads to stress? And if the stress is unnecessary, what can you do to stop?

One of the things you can do is to get the mind in concentration. The teaching keeps coming back to concentration. Insight without concentration doesn't work all that well. You can gain certain levels of insight into things, and develop dispassion for certain things going on in the mind and certain ways of acting. But to get really detailed, you've got to get everything very, very quiet.

It's like listening for a sound in the house. Say there are mice in the walls, you suspect. But if you've got the stereo blaring and the TV on and the Internet and the refrigerator on, you're not going to hear the mice. You've got to turn everything off; get everything in the house as quiet as possible. And *you* have to sit as quietly as possible, because if you move around in the house and hear floorboard creak, maybe it's you causing the creak. So you've got to get the mind still.

While wrestling the mind down into stillness, sometimes you encounter weird things going on in your body. A lot of issues around rapture come in here. But you

want to sort through those. You allow the rapture to happen. If it's too much, let it go out the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet, out your eyes, out your ears. Find a way of visualizing it exiting the body if it's too strong. But don't be afraid of it. Often the rapture is something that you want to use, because once the mind is fed well with a sense of good energy, it has the strength to keep on sitting. If the energy doesn't feel good, it's like pumping water into the system of a house where the pipes are poorly connected. Pressure will build up here or there, because of blockages. If you can sort things out and open up all the channels, then the energy will flow smoothly. If the rapture is needed, it'll do its work and then it'll subside. It gives you some nourishment and then you can really calm things down.

That's when you can look more deeply: These four noble truths, what do they apply to?

Well, the hindrances, for instance, are part of the cause of suffering. So those are things you want to abandon. Appropriate attention has the duty of looking into the things that would normally give rise to the hindrances—say, lust or ill-will—and learns to look at them in a way that cuts the hindrance off.

This is one of the reasons why we have the reflection on the 32 parts of the body, or the chant on the four *brahma-viharas*: to give you a new attitude toward the things that would ordinarily get you worked up either into lust or into ill-will, so you can see that it's not really worth your time getting involved in those mind states. As for things that would normally trigger them, you can learn to look at them in new ways, and see that you don't have to respond to them in the old way.

This is what a lot of what the meditation does: It helps you to see that you're free to respond in new ways, from a different perspective. So whatever way you could think that would make the object of your lust not so desirable or the object of your anger and ill-will not quite so irritating, learn to look at it in those ways. You're putting appropriate attention into action. In other words, it becomes a guide for ardency so that you really can put an end to the ways you're causing suffering for yourself.

Similarly with the factors for awakening, which are qualities that correspond to the path: Those are things that you want to use appropriate attention to develop. And what does develop mindfulness? What develops analysis of qualities? One of the things, the Buddha said, is to look at what you're doing and see what's skillful and what's not. Then you put some effort into doing things that are skillful and abandoning what's not. That's how you get the rapture and then the calm. Again, here's the same pattern: You feed the body, you feed the mind, with rapture. Once they're fed, the rapture is no longer needed and it can subside.

Just don't bottle it up. This way, you get the mind out of the hindrances and onto the path.

There's another passage where the Buddha talks about using appropriate attention to look at the five aggregates. Where are you going to see them? In your concentration. Or you can see them as you leave concentration, or as you go from one level of concentration to another—these activities in the mind. You can't determine ahead of time which aggregate is going to be the one that will spark insight, the one that's going to hit you. Say you've been holding on to a particular way of doing things, or a particular way of feeling or perceiving, thinking, whatever. Then all of a sudden it strikes you: What you thought was your friend is not your friend; what you thought you could rely on, you can't rely on. That's when you let go.

You can't determine ahead of time which of the aggregates is going to be the trigger, or which of the perceptions that you apply. The clinging-aggregates, as the Buddha said, are the first noble truth, and that's something to be comprehend—in other words, something you should comprehend until you develop dispassion for it—that kind of comprehension. This is where the Buddha brings in what are usually called the three characteristics. In the Canon they call them perceptions. There's the perception of inconstancy, the perception of stress, and perception of not self. They're never called characteristics in the Canon. The sutta that we call the *Anatta-lakkhana Sutta*: That name there is not in the Canon; it was something applied later.

These are perceptions that you apply to the clinging-aggregates so as to develop a sense of dispassion toward them. One way is when the mind gets really still and you're really good at keeping it still, and you can begin to see, "What am I doing to keep the concentration together?" You've got the form of the body. You've got the feeling of ease. You've got the perception, say, of the breath that holds you here. You've got directed thought and evaluation—those are the *saṅkhāras* or fabrications. Then there's your consciousness of all these things.

It's as if you've roped the five aggregates into one place where you can watch them all at the same time. And you're making good use of them. They allow you to apply the three characteristics or the three perceptions to other things outside as well. When the mind gets still, you see a lot of things you didn't see before, in terms of how and why the mind focuses on something and lays claim to something, thinking that it'll give rise to ease and well-being. But if you've got the greater ease of concentration, you begin to see that that's not the case. That's what allows you to let these things go. It can either be through seeing them as inconstant or perceiving them as stressful or not self—whichever hits home.

Then you can turn on the concentration itself, because it, too, is made out of these aggregates. You can start taking that apart. And again, you don't know which of the three characteristics or the three perceptions is going to be the one that really hits you, or which particular aggregate. In the Forest Tradition, they focus a lot on perception, because the labels we apply to things really color everything else in the mind. So you might want to start with that. See if there's some way that you can develop dispassion for the things you're clinging to.

So this principle of appropriate attention starts with the ordinary, everyday issue of skillful and unskillful action, and moves deeper and deeper inside. It's always a question of: What are you doing, why are you doing it, and if you can see there's stress, do you have another alternative?

Someone from Singapore once had just been introduced to some of Ajaan Lee's writings and wrote a letter to us at the monastery in Rayong. He was talking about his meditation practice, in which he was learning to apply the three perceptions to everything through the course of the day. Ajaan Fuang told me to write back and say, "Look, the issue is not the inconstancy of things out there, it's the inconstancy in your own mind. Don't go blaming other things for being inconstant, stressful, not-self. The things you're clinging to are in the mind, the mind that's saying, 'inconstant, stressful, not-self.' That's the main problem."

So you've got to look all around, but you have to look all around in stages. The reason we apply these perceptions is because they're value judgments that focus on the things that will give rise to dispassion. They're tools for fulfilling the duties related to the four noble truths.

So as the Buddha said, appropriate attention is the primary internal quality that can lead to awakening. There's nothing that's more useful. If you ask the right questions, you get the right answers. If you ask the wrong questions, then no matter how many answers you get, none of them will work.

So right now the question is what? Its: "How can you get the mind to settle down? How can you develop the qualities of the path?" Work on that. Keep these other questions in the back of your mind: "What's skillful right now? What's not skillful? What am I doing? And what's it connected to in terms of the stress or ease I feel?" Ajaan Lee once said that we can see the results, but if we don't see the causes, it's not insight. If we can see the causes but not the results, that's not insight, either. You have to see the connection between what you're doing and the level of stress that's resulting. Then seeing how you can stop doing whatever is causing the stress: That's insight.

It all starts with this quality of alertness coupled with ardency—looking at what you're doing and trying your best to do it right.