

Alighting on the Dhamma

July 26, 2016

We read stories of people gaining awakening while listening to the Dhamma, especially while listening to the Dhamma from the Buddha, and we wonder if it had everything to do with the fact that the Buddha was the one giving the talk. But as he said, it also had to do with the person listening. And this could be with any talk: If you bring these five qualities to the talk, there's the opportunity to—as he said—alight on the Dhamma.

The five qualities are these: One, you don't despise the speaker. Two, you don't despise the talk. Three, you don't despise yourself. Four, your mind is single and not scattered. And five, you apply appropriate attention.

The first three about not despising are important because when you despise something, you put up a barrier. You decide, "I'm not going to listen to this person's talk" or "I don't like the topic of the talk." You can't really take the talk in. You're not really giving yourself over to what it's actually saying. You're putting an interpretive filter in the way, and it's a pretty bad one, too.

Ajaan Suwat talked about how he would listen to Ajaan Tate's Dhamma talks. Now, he'd had many issues with Ajaan Tate in the past. But he still liked listening to Ajaan Tate's Dhamma talks. He said he found that he could get his mind to settle down very quickly, regardless of the fact that Ajaan Tate had done some things that Ajaan Suwat didn't respect.

I had a similar experience. There was a monk in Thailand who I'd learned not to respect, just by watching his behavior. But he gave really good Dhamma talks. I found that my mind could get into strong concentration listening to him. So don't let your opinion of the speaker get in your way.

The same with the topic: Sometimes it may be a very simple topic, but it may be precisely what you need. If you decide, "This topic is beneath me," then you don't open yourself up to hearing it again and hearing it from a new angle, learning something new about it and also learning something new about yourself in the process.

And finally, not despising yourself: Maybe you keep telling yourself, “I’m not capable of doing this.” That right there is a block. So when the Dhamma talk is about what’s going on in the human mind, you remind yourself, “Okay, I’ve got a human mind; it’s not that different from other people’s minds. The details may be different, but the basic structure is the same for everyone. So maybe there’s something here I can learn, something here I can master.”

Now, to master what you’re hearing, you have to have the quality of singleness of mind and bring appropriate attention. The word for “singleness” here, *ekagga*, is sometimes translated as *one pointedness*. *Eka* means *one*, but *agga* doesn’t necessarily mean *point*. It’s the tip of a mountain or the ridge of a roof—the topmost part of something. It can also mean *gathering place*. A place where monks used to gather for the uposathas, and still gather for the uposathas, in Pali is called *uposathagga*. Where they gather for meals is called *bhattagga*. So *ekagga* means *one place where you gather*.

Sometimes your quality of being gathered into one means that your mind is just one point—you’re aware of only one point, to the extent that you’re not aware of your body or aware of sounds. But obviously the Buddha is not talking about that here. If your mind is so one-pointed that you can’t hear sounds, you’re not going to hear the Dhamma talk. So it’s more likely to mean that it’s all about being gathered around what the talk is all about. You’re not paying attention to anything else; your mind is not scattered in other places. It’s right there with the talk.

And finally, appropriate attention: This means that you bring the questions of the four noble truths to bear on noticing, “Where is the stress in my mind as I am listening to the talk? What’s the cause of stress? How does the talk help illuminate my understanding of where the stress is and what’s causing the stress? Or what qualities does it recommend that I develop so that my mind gets on the path to the end of stress and can realize the cessation of stress?”

So you’re looking both at your own mind and you’re listening to the talk at the same time, applying appropriate attention to both: “How does this talk illuminate these issues? And once they’re illuminated, how do they apply to my mind?” That’s how those people listening to the Dhamma talks in the past were able to gain awakening, because they didn’t leave it just at the words.

There is a term in Pali, *padaparama*, which means basically *at best just the words*. In other words, for some people listening to the talk, that's all it is—just words to them. They don't get awakening of any kind. But you can decide to take those words and use them to point to things going on in your mind. And it's your choice. The speaker may be sitting there, pointing, pointing, pointing at what's going on in your mind, but if you decide not to point the words of the talk at things going on in your mind, the talk will go right past you.

But if you do point those words at what's going on in your mind—you allow them to point, you allow them to come into the mind, to illumine what's going on in the mind—then you'll benefit. You'll be able to step back from things happening in the mind and see them in a new light.

But as we tend to—as Ajaan Suwat used to say—see suffering as our enemy, we push it away and don't want to look at it. We see craving as our friend, so we bring it on. Yet if you want see how the craving is actually causing the stress and suffering, you have to realize that craving is *not* your friend. It's something you want to abandon. As for stress, you make it your friend to the extent that you want to comprehend it, find out about it—so that eventually you can go past it.

In a way, you're acting like a con man, befriending something that you want to get rid of or something that you want to get past. But in this case, it doesn't matter—the suffering is not a person that you're cheating. You want to get to know it really well, really intimately, so that you can figure out, “Okay, what is this? And what am I doing around it?”

It's not that your awareness of the suffering is one thing and the suffering is just coming in at you without your having participated. You're participating in the suffering and creating it. You want to see that, so you have to get intimate with it until you realize, “Okay, this is really part of me; part of me is in there.” It's going to require abandoning part of you. But you have to recognize what it is.

Now, all these qualities apply not only listening to the Dhamma but also to when you're practicing concentration. This is why listening to the Dhamma and practicing at the same time go together—as they say in Pali—like milk and water. The two activities are right there together, developing and depending on the same qualities of mind.

You don't want to despise the person who taught the meditation topic, i.e., the Buddha. And you don't despise the topic of the concentration. In this case, it's the breath. You don't sit there saying, "Well, I'm going to stick with the breath only as long as I have to so that I can get to something better." You want to pay careful attention to the breath. Don't despise it. Or, as the chant we had just now said, have respect for your concentration. That means having respect for your object.

The breath in particular is a really good object to work with because it has a huge impact on your body and a huge impact on your mind. As you begin to explore, you begin to realize that the way you breathe, the way the breath energy moves in the body, if left to its own devices, is pretty random. But if you learn to take it on as a skill, then it can take you someplace. And as with any skill, you have to learn how to respect your materials.

It's like being a carpenter. You have to respect your wood. Understand what wood is all about, instead of just trying to push the wood into the shape you want. You realize there are times when you have to cut it like this, and times when you have to cut it like that. You have to make allowances for the fact that it's going to expand and contract. Different types of wood, different grains of wood are useful for different parts of whatever you want to build. In other words, you pay really careful attention to the wood. You show respect to the wood, and that enables you to become a master of the wood.

It's the same with the breath. You want to have respect for the fact that this is something with a huge impact on the mind, so you want to look carefully into what it's doing—what you can make it do; what you can't make it do.

And have some respect for the property of concentration in and of itself, in the sense of having a mind that's just still. All too often, when the mind achieves a little bit of stillness, you get impatient and say, "What's next?" You have to learn to see stillness itself is also a skill. And in this case, the impatience—the "what's next?"—is what you have to abandon. That's the voice you have to learn not to listen to.

Of course, to do all this you have to have some respect for yourself— your own ability to get the mind to settle down. If it's not settling down, you have to take heart in the fact that there have been people in the past who have had difficulties

but were finally able to do it. And whether it's a skill that comes easily or a skill that comes hard, it's a skill you've got to master.

And fortunately, it's something human beings can do.

This is where that element of conceit that Ven. Ananda talked about is useful: "Other people can do this. They're human beings. I'm a human being. I can do it, too." You've got to have that attitude. Otherwise, you put up a barrier. That barrier of despising yourself will make it impossible for you to do it. So you've got to have the confidence that this is skill you can master.

Now, it may take some more time. In our culture, we tend to be extremely impatient. I was reading the other day that there are lot of people who, if they have to wait for two seconds for a video to download onto their device, give up and move on to something else. Well, concentration is going to take more than two seconds. Sometimes it takes two years to figure it out, sometimes even more. But it's one of those skills that you have to develop regardless of whether it comes easily or not. So you need to keep your spirits buoyed up. Keep yourself confident that this is something you can do.

And of course there's that quality of *ekagga*—of having the mind gathered into one around the object. In fact, that's the definition of concentration—the one-gatheredness of the mind.

And finally, appropriate attention: This is where the Buddha says that once the mind has been gathered solidly and you're good at it, then you start analyzing it in terms of the four noble truths. You begin to realize that this concentration state that you've got going here is composed of aggregates. As long as you're clinging to it, there's going to be suffering—something you have to comprehend. Up to this point, you've simply been developing it, but now you have to comprehend it. Which means understanding: What's the perception here? What's the thought construct? What's the feeling here? And then seeing these activities as things worthy of dispassion.

Now, you don't want to jump to dispassion too quickly. If you do it too quickly, you lose the foundation in concentration you need in order help pry away your attachments to other things. In fact, while you're developing the concentration, you want to hold on to it. At that point, the clinging is not a problem, because you use the concentration to pry away your attachments to

sensuality in general, i.e., the mind's fascination with making sensual plans for sensual pleasures.

But there comes a point where you've got to turn on the concentration itself—to see it as something not only to develop. Now it's developed to the point where you have to learn how to comprehend it to the point of dispassion, so that you can abandon your attachment to it. That's what enables you to—as the Buddha would say—alight on the Dhamma.

You take apart the intention and the attention that are keeping the concentration going. You take apart your attachment to the perception. The concentration gets more and more refined. Finally you get to the point where you have to learn not to do anything at all—no intention one way or the other, either to stay or to go.

Now, you can see that *in* concentration. And the reason you see it is because you've been applying appropriate attention. You realize that even staying in concentration at that point has an element of stress, but going someplace else in concentration has stress as well. The only alternative is neither to stay nor to go. That's the riddle that appropriate attention takes you to. And it's in this way that practicing concentration does help you gain awakening—as the Buddha said, to alight on the Dhamma.

So bring the same set of qualities to listening to a Dhamma talk that you would bring to listening to your concentration, developing it, analyzing it, so that eventually you can go beyond it. In both cases, the talk and the concentration are there to be used and then put aside. If you bring the proper attitudes and the proper qualities of mind both to the listening and to the concentration, you find that they really do give great benefits.

So look inside yourself and see which attitudes and qualities are missing, and bring them into line. Because it's not necessary to have the Buddha sitting here talking to you for you to see the Dhamma. The Dhamma is there to be seen all the time—simply that you have to develop the right eye to see it.