

Look at Yourself

August 31, 2017

We're a well-educated group, and sometimes that's our problem. Our education teaches us to look outside, to judge other people, and we have very little chance to look at ourselves. We're good at thinking in abstractions, but we're very poor at looking at the details of what we're doing, the results of what we're doing, what's going on right under our nose, right *in* our nose with the breath. So as you come to the meditation, as you come to the practice as a whole, you have to learn a lot of new skills.

There's a passage where Ven. Ananda asks the Buddha: How can a person live in the Sangha and live at peace? The Buddha's basic answer, aside from developing your powers of concentration and getting rid of your defilements, starts out by saying to focus on your own actions, on your own faults. Don't focus on the actions and faults of others, aside from the question of whether you can learn from them. Sometimes other people do things that are good examples—and they may be little things. Like after the storm today: A lot of the monks came out and swept around. Not everybody. But some people have that sense: an event happens in the monastery that requires a lot of cleaning up, and more hands make lighter work. That's one instance of looking at others for good examples.

You can look at others for their faults only if you then turn around and look at yourself to ask yourself: "Do I have those faults?" This is what it looks like when other people do those things, and of course that's what you're going to look like to others when you do those things. So if it doesn't look good in other people, you might tell yourself, "Maybe I should change the way I do things." Your purpose in looking at the faults of others is to turn around and look at your own faults, and to deal with your own behavior, because it's in here that the problem lies.

When the Buddha talks about the cause of suffering, he doesn't talk about the economy. He doesn't talk about the weather. He talks about your craving, your ignorance. Where do these things happen? Right here. It's easy to learn about the words, but it's a lot more difficult to see exactly how craving arises, how it takes over, why you give into it. These are individual matters, and each time they happen, they happen in a slightly different way. It's because they have these differences that craving can keep fooling you. You think you've closed off one particular type of foolishness in the mind, but you find—oops! There's another one! The craving's found another way to slip in. It's by dealing with your defilements one by one by one: That's how you get to know them.

I was reading a book one time on the caves in Ellora, and the author was noting that the artists in the very early caves seemed to have a very specific knowledge of the different devas. They portrayed the devas with lots of different personalities. In the later caves, though, the devas became more generalized, more generic, and much less detailed. In other words, perhaps in the early generations the monks actually did have experience seeing devas, and they could tell the artists, “This is what they look like.” But then as people got more and more scholarly and got more and more into the concepts, their direct experience went away.

Now, there is the wisdom that comes from reading and there’s the wisdom that comes from thinking about things, but the real wisdom, the real discernment—the wisdom of development—comes from getting down to the nuts and bolts, the nitty-gritty of what you’re doing with your breath right now, how the mind is able to stay established and how it’s not able to stay established, and not being too quick to want to go on to the next step. After all, each step teaches you skills that you’re going to need for the next.

The practice of virtue, for instance, builds on generosity. Virtue is a type of gift. It’s a gift to yourself; it’s a gift to others. It’s a gift to yourself in the sense that you’re not creating the kind of kamma that’s going to lead to suffering down the line. It’s a gift to others in that you’re not harassing them. You don’t present them any danger. Also, as you practice the precepts, you begin to learn mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. In other words, keeping the precept in mind, you have to be alert to what you’re doing and ardent in wanting to stick with the precept, all of which are qualities you’re going to need for mindfulness practice.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha said the basis for strong mindfulness is views made straight—i.e., views in line with the principle of kamma—and pure virtue. In other words, you really hold to the precepts. As you develop the skills needed in meditation, the fact that you’re not doing anything that’s causing remorse or regret means you’re not putting up walls in the mind. This way, your mindfulness practice builds on your ability to remember things way back, things you’ve learned from the practice in various times, because you haven’t been throwing up walls in the mind in the meantime.

Then mindfulness, in turn, gives you the skills you need for concentration, because as you get the mind into concentration, what are the themes of concentration? The main ones are the four establishments of mindfulness. You stay with the breath. You stay with analysis of the parts of the body. You do it in a way that gets the mind to settle down, because the concentration is then needed for discernment. You can gain discernment from reading books, of course, without

much concentration, just enough concentration to read. But to really see these things happening in your mind, you have to get the mind really, really still.

At the same time, in getting the mind to settle down, you're dealing with what? You're dealing with the aggregates. You're going to have to be using the aggregates or the sense media or the properties as the terms you use to analyze things with your discernment. You get to know these things really well—what's a perception, what's a feeling—by using them to get the mind into concentration. You get hands-on experience with these different kinds of fabrication, so that when the time comes to analyze them for the purpose of dispassion, you know what they are. They're not just concepts. They're things you've dealt with directly.

It's this kind of discernment—the discernment that deals with individual things directly here in the present moment—that's able to see them. The Buddha says that discernment sees things as separate, and you can see them as separate only after having really been with them and practiced with them thoroughly. That's how you gain release from them. If you don't really know them on this level, there's no way you can get release. You can think about them. you can have theories about them, but the actual knowledge, the actual discernment that comes from developing the mind is needed for that kind of knowledge to really dig into the mind and dig things out, to free the mind.

So we're not dealing with abstractions. We're dealing with specific events right here, right now, and you have to be right here, right now consistently in order to see how things are separate but connected. Where are they connected? They're connected right here. If you're going to be finding fault, find fault with the fact that you're not here yet. Work on that. And don't try to skip over the steps, because there are no unnecessary steps in the practice. They're all there for a purpose. The Buddha didn't have an eightfold path because he liked the number eight. It was because these eight factors were needed. He had the triple training, again not because he liked the number three, but because virtue is necessary for concentration to be solid and for concentration to be honest concentration. Honest concentration is necessary for discernment to be honest discernment. There are ways in which discernment fosters your concentration and your concentration fosters your virtue, but that's only after you have some foundation.

So remember, the issues are right here, right in front of your nose, so don't go looking too far out in front of your nose, and don't go too far into abstractions or into other people's behavior. Keep your focus just right, and that's when you'll be able to see.