

One Thing Clear Through

October 26, 2019

Okay, focus on your breath.

We have some background music tonight, but don't focus there. You have to give up some things if you want to get something of better value. And there's a lot more value in focusing on the breath, trying to stay with the breath as continually as you can to develop some strength of mind.

This is a basic principle all the way through the Buddha's teachings. Luang Puu Dune one time came to see Ajaan Suwat when he was in Thailand and gave a Dhamma talk. The main theme of the Dhamma talk was that the practice of the Dhamma is one thing clear through, from the very beginning to the very end. It starts with generosity and ends with letting go. And every step along the way there's going to be some letting go—which is probably one of the reasons why the Buddha said that nobody attains jhana, nobody attains any of the noble attainments, without being generous.

So what do you learn from generosity? You learn, one, the principle that you do have freedom of choice. You have an object—or you have some time, or you have some knowledge—and you could hold onto it, keep it to yourself, or you could share. Our initial instinct as children is to hold on, and some people never outgrow that childish instinct. But when you stop and think that you actually get more happiness out of giving, one, you've learned freedom of choice—you don't have to give into your greed—and two, you've learned how to observe your own mind—that the pleasure that comes, say, from eating something is nothing compared to the pleasure of seeing someone else being made happy. It's a more mental, emotional pleasure in the second instance, and it's worth the trade.

So you've learned how to observe your mind and you've learned how to rate or give priority to some pleasures over others. And that's a principle you've got to carry with you all the way through. There's that passage in the Dhammapada where the Buddha says that if you see a greater happiness that comes from forsaking a lesser happiness, you're willing to forsake the lesser happiness for the sake of the greater one.

This fits in with another principle that underlies discernment, which is the basic question of discernment, "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?" Realizing that the long-term is really worth it, and it's going to have to come from your actions.

Now these are very basic principles. You might say that they almost go without saying. But how consistently do we live our lives by them? Because we have lots of other conflicting opinions in the mind as well.

I once read someone describing that most people's worldviews are like a big bag that they've stuffed with things like Lego blocks. And in some cases the Lego blocks are put together to form little structures, or parts of structures, and in other cases they're just left randomly lying around.

Every time we act, we have to look into the mind and decide, "Is this act worth doing or not?" This is where our views come into play. Is it worth it? What would be the results? And because most people's minds are like grab bags, the decisions they make are not always that consistent. Sometimes we act as if the law of karma was in force and other times we act as if it weren't. Sometimes we act as if there was a Buddha in the world who showed us the way to true happiness, and sometimes we act as if there never was such a person.

It's because of this randomness of our views, or the inconsistency in our views, that so many of us live lives that don't really accomplish all that much. If you want to accomplish something, you have to have a goal and order things in line with that goal. This ability to prioritize your levels of pleasure as to what's more worth doing than something else: That's the beginning of developing some consistency in your goals. It's a beginning sign of discernment.

Then the mindfulness, alertness, and ardency, all the qualities you develop as you meditate, help to make your actions more consistent, in line with what discernment teaches us. Because if you have the teachings of the Buddha in mind but then you forget them, it's as if the Buddha never existed. Which is why we need mindfulness to keep remembering: Our actions matter, and some forms of happiness are more worth pursuing than others.

Then, with experience, we get a better and better sense of what those greater forms of happiness are. There's the practice of virtue, the practice of concentration, the development of discernment. In every case, there are things we have to give up in order to get something of greater value.

With virtue, there are times when you would like to break the precepts—it would be easier, it would be convenient—but the long-term results would not be good. Or you hear there are types of meditation where they allow the mind simply to wander around, and all you have to do is follow its wanderings. Sounds good, the mind is free to go wherever it wants, but it doesn't develop any real strength. So you have to let go of its wanderings, resist its wanderings. There are things you've got to let go.

And then with discernment, things that you've been holding onto tight, you begin to realize you're holding onto them, you're feeding on them. Feeding is the opposite of giving. When you feed on something, you take it in, take it in, take it in. With giving, you let it go, let it go.

Ajaan Lee illustrates this in a graphic manner. He says that when dispassion comes, it's as if you've got something in your mouth and you spit it out. You could have swallowed it but you decide not to. Then you feel that you're lighter as a result.

But there are a lot of things we're not ready to give up yet. So you look at where you are in the practice: What things *can* you give up for the sake of a greater happiness? Look around you. Again, it may be in terms of material things, it may be in terms of your time, habits of different kinds, feeding habits. With practice, it gets more and more refined.

The way you approach concentration practice is also a lesson in this. Some people, when they know they have an hour, say "Well, I've got some time to *gradually* settle down," and finally land toward the end of the hour—because it's what they're familiar with, they feel they can handle it. If the mind were to settle down right at the very beginning, they wouldn't know what to do. Well, that's a really good lesson, because it is possible to remember, from one meditation session to the next, where you were when you settled down the last time: how you were breathing, what you'd been doing leading up to being settled down that actually helped you get there. Then you can try to re-create those conditions in the mind right now, in the body right now, from the very beginning of the hour.

Then, when you've got the mind down, the question comes "Well, what do I do with it now?" You learn how to look after it. It's helpful to think you've got five minutes to meditate, five minutes to get the mind down. And then once it's down there, then you look at it, you learn from it as you try to maintain it. Keeping the mind balanced with its object is very different from getting it there. It requires a different set of skills.

So if you can give up your general narrative of the gradual *glide* into a little bit of stillness at the end of the session, and try a new narrative where you're right here, so you might as well just stay right here, then all the different voices that got to chatter away during the glide down are suddenly going to show themselves because you're resisting them.

When I was up in the Bay Area last month, my host when he picked me up at the airport said, "You've got to hear this, it's the worst Dhamma talk in the world!" And he played it for me, and one of the points the person was making was that we go through life, why do we add pain to the pain we already have? He said, "Like when you're meditating: Say there's an itch in a certain part of the body and on a scale from minus ten to plus ten, the itch is only about a minus one. But if you make up your mind you're not going to move, you're not going to scratch it, all of a sudden it turns into a minus five, a minus six. And this, he said, is dumb.

But that's measuring value simply in terms of ease and convenience, not in terms of qualities of the mind that you gain by giving things up, by resisting things, resisting the impulse to just go for your habit. It's a way of calculating pleasures and pains that shows no real discernment. If you're going to learn new ways of doing things, you have to learn how to resist your old ways of doing things, learn how to say No to them. That takes more conscious effort, but then, that's what all good things require.

Any course of action where you're required to change the way you act is going to require this. It's the only way to learn. And basically that's the message of the four noble truths: You've got to change the way you've been acting. The way you've been acting has been leading to

suffering, but you can act in a different way. You can give up your old habits and try something new. It takes effort, but it's going to be worth it in the long run.

So we try to keep those four noble truths in mind as our major framework to give us a sense of priorities, a map as to what kind of actions are worthwhile, which ones are not. And they start with those questions: What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? And what kind of short-term pleasures do I have to give up in order to get something more long-term?

This is one of the lessons we learn from giving, and as it goes from giving to giving up to letting go. We're doing, as I said, the opposite of feeding. Remember that feeding is the Buddha's definition of suffering. The word for clinging, *upadana*, can also mean to feed. So we start the practice by the opposite of feeding, with little acts of the opposite of feeding. Then, over time, we get finally to the point where the mind achieves a state where there is no need to feed. That's when the practice has delivered you to where you want to go: a happiness that was worth more than all the effort that went into getting there.

You know that comparison where the Buddha said that if you could make a deal where they would stab you with a hundred spears early in the morning, a hundred spears at noon, and a hundred spears in the evening—every day for a hundred years—but if you were guaranteed awakening at the end of those hundred years, it'd be a deal worth making. And when you finally did gain awakening you wouldn't consider that you'd achieved it through pain. It was achieved through joy. The happiness of awakening is *that* intense, *that* overwhelming, *that* total.

And the way to get started and the way to continue toward that happiness is having an attitude of giving, which teaches you to watch the happiness of your mind and learn how to grade the levels of happiness. Watch your mind in action, watch the results, and judge the results as to which is better than what. And developing those habits of observation and judgment will carry you all the way through.