

Everything You Need

November 19, 2019

Take stock of what you've got right now. You've got the body sitting here breathing. You've got the mind, thinking and aware. You've got everything you need to make you happy. You also have everything you need to make yourself thoroughly miserable. The trick lies in knowing which is which. There are lots of potentials in the body, lots of potentials in the mind, and they can take us in all kinds of directions.

This is why we need a teaching, why we need a Buddha as our admirable friend to give us some guidance, so that we don't go choosing the wrong potentials, or taking something perfectly good and turning it into something very bad. This is what the Buddha meant when he said that the whole of the holy life is having admirable friends or the practice of admirable friendship. For a friendship to be admirable, you don't just have an admirable friend. You also try to emulate the good qualities of that friend, in this case, the Buddha.

The Buddha was a person of discernment, a person of compassion and purity. You try to emulate those qualities in yourself. But to know what they mean, it's good to read about him, to get an idea of how he acted with different people and how he recommended practicing.

The most important internal quality, he said, in addition to having an admirable friend, is appropriate attention. What this means is approaching each present moment in a skillful way.

Sometimes you hear that the Buddha said that each present moment is something new and totally fresh unlike any other moment ever in the past, and you should approach it as a mystery. But that's not what the Buddha taught. He said that there are some useful Dhamma lessons to apply to each present moment in a way that can help put an end to suffering.

The first is the distinction between what's skillful and what's not. This falls in line with what he says is a teacher's main responsibility to you as a student: to give you an idea of what's to be done and what's not to be done—in other words, what actions will lead to happiness, what actions will lead to suffering and harm. That distinction runs through everything he taught.

There's another misunderstanding that the Buddha didn't really teach any right and wrong, and held that right and wrong were just relative conventions. Actually, he had a very strong sense of right and wrong. That's why the factors of the path are called *right*, from right view all the way down to right concentration, and their opposites are called *wrong*. And part of right view is realizing that you are responsible for your actions, and you have the power of choice as to what to do and what not to do. And in every present moment there is a skillful alternative. You want to look for that.

The Buddha gives some general guidelines, in the precepts. He also gives a theoretical background, pointing out how what you experience right now is a combination of results of past actions, your present actions, and the results of your present actions. Which means that

there are some things in the present moment that you won't be able to change, but there are other things that you can, so you want to focus on what you can. And what you can do, as he said, plays such a huge role in your experience of the present moment that you can actually take yourself to a point where no matter what your past karma is, you don't have to suffer. So keep that possibility in mind. It helps to prevent you from settling for second best, or third best, or fourth. It also makes you focus very directly on your own actions.

If you believe that what you're doing right now doesn't come from you—if it comes from some force acting through you or it's something totally beyond your control—you're not going to focus on your actions at all. You're going to focus someplace else. Especially if you feel that the present moment is determined, the idea of what you should do right now and should not do right now doesn't have any theoretical basis, doesn't even really make sense. If everything were predetermined, there'd be no choice. Things would just have to happen. But if you realize that they *don't* have to happen in some cases, you're going to focus on what you can do to minimize the suffering and to maximize the pleasure and the well-being.

If you look inside, you realize that there are lots of different things you could do. And one of the basic lessons is: You don't have to identify with everything that you've got inside. You don't have to identify with the body. You don't have to identify with your feelings, your perceptions, your thoughts, even your awareness at the senses, your consciousness. You don't have to identify with these things if identifying with them leads to suffering. You have that choice.

We talk about the committee of the mind and that's only part of the range of what you can latch onto here. There are times when you identify with the body. You want it to do certain things and you realize that it is to some extent in your power to do those things. If the body were totally out of your control, there wouldn't be any confusion about whether it's yours or not. It'd be something alien. But the fact that you have some control over it gives you some sense that there are times when you can identify with it as your body, and you're going to use it to do things that you want. The same with your feelings, your perceptions, your thoughts, even your choice of where to focus your consciousness: You have some control over these things, but there are times when holding on to them causes trouble.

This is why the Buddha introduced the concept of not-self as a strategy for sorting out all the different things you've got here, as to what's helpful and what's not; what you want to hold onto, what you don't want to hold on to. And one of the first lessons about the teachings on self and not-self, is that both of these are activities—what the Buddha calls *I-making* and *my-making* on the side of selfing. And the perception of not-self: That's something you do—you choose to do—on the other side.

He never addressed directly the question of whether there is or is not a self. If he had, he would have spent lots of time trying to define what self is, and why you should agree with him that there is no self. But he never did. And the question is, what would that accomplish? It

would be very abstract. As he said, if you take a position either that there is a self or there is no self, that becomes a thicket of views, and you'll never get yourself out.

But if you look at self and not-self as activities, there's a clear logic. You do these things because they lead to happiness. And so if you find yourself selfing or identifying with something that is leading to harm, at that point your idea of self or who you are, what you identify with, is working at cross-purposes with your original intention. You remember that you hold onto the body because you want to use it to do things that will be good, that would lead to pleasure, lead to happiness, lead to well-being. The same with holding onto your feelings, holding on to your perceptions, your thoughts, your awareness: You hold on because they're going to be helpful. But just because they were helpful yesterday doesn't mean they're going to be helpful today. And you have the choice of saying, "No," today. That's where you bring in the perception of not-self.

So it's good to realize that you have this choice. You're not stuck with a self that somebody else made for you, or that willy-nilly you happen to be burdened with. It, too, is an action. And because you have the power to choose what to do and what not to do, you can look at something and say, "I will identify with this now, but maybe not later on."

Take your body for instance. There are aspects of the body that are helpful. We focus on the breath for our concentration. We use the body as we practice virtue, as we practice generosity. And for those purposes, it's useful to think of it as yours. But then the body has its illnesses. It grows old. It's going to die at some point. You've got to learn how to put it aside, put it down, and not carry it around all the time. Otherwise, way too many people die and they have nowhere else to go. They just hang around their bodies, and it's a miserable state to be in. On the one hand, the body's decaying. On the other, you think there's nowhere else you can go, because it's you, it's yours. But actually, you don't have to latch onto the body. Your awareness can exist based on its cravings and clings, based on its desires. It doesn't need the body at that point. In fact, it's better off without the body. You can focus your desires on a better place to go. As long as you haven't gained full awakening, choose a spot where you can continue with the practice.

So we have this range of possibilities, and a lot of the practice lies in learning how to choose, how to be wise in your choices. And that starts with choosing to follow the Buddha's teachings on that very issue: that you do have choices. There are many sad cases where, when people die, if they've done something really bad in this lifetime and they see some horrible realm opening up in front of them, there'll be a voice inside that says, "Ah, this is going to be my punishment. This is the punishment I deserve," and they just slip down into misery. But they don't have to.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has you think about the good things you've done—not the good times you had, the good things you've done—to give you a sense that you don't deserve punishment. You merit something good. That helps lift your spirits at a time

when everything else is pulling them down.

So, while you're still alive and healthy, try to gain a sense of the potentials you have here, and which ones are the ones you want to develop, which are the ones you want to put aside. Get very clear about what you're doing. The Buddha's teachings are there to give you some advice. Approach the present moment looking for where is the suffering? In other words, where is the clinging right now and where is the craving that's causing the suffering?

That's what appropriate attention means. You look at the present moment and you apply the four noble truths to every present moment that comes. What can you develop right now that will be in line with the path? The potentials are there. Everything you need is right here. Just make sure you don't choose the wrong path.

And even though in the very beginning there's a lot you don't know—and it's wise to admit the fact that you don't know these things—still it is possible to learn. The more you learn from applying the Buddha's teachings, the more precise your understanding of appropriate attention and right view is going to be, as you apply it to the next moment, and the next, and then the next. You can learn from each moment as to what works and what doesn't, and then you can bring that new knowledge to the succeeding moments. Wisdom lies not only in realizing the things you don't know, but also valuing the things you do know and putting them to use.

Ajaan Lee, when he discusses the practice of mindfulness, stresses the three qualities you bring to the practice of mindfulness: mindfulness, ardency, and alertness. And among those three, ardency is the factor that, he says, has to do with wisdom. Ardency is your desire to abandon what's unskillful and develop what's skillful in its place. That's where the discernment lies—in other words, realizing that you can learn, that you can apply your knowledge, and wanting to do that. Not all desire is bad. The desire to be skillful is something you want to encourage, something you want to identify with as long as you need it.

So with the Buddha as our admirable friend, we develop appropriate attention inside. When we have those two qualities, we really do have everything we need to be happy, and everything we need to stop making ourselves miserable. So keep those two principles in mind.