

Know the Dhamma by Its Results

February 14, 2020

The Buddha called his teaching a path that leads to results, which means that the test of anything you might do as you practice lies in the results that it leads to. The Buddha himself never said that something had to be said by him in order to count as Dhamma, and the forest ajaans make this point, too. Ajaan Maha Boowa says that the Buddha's teachings as we have them in the texts are like a big pot of basic tonic, and then the good doctor knows what to add to the basic tonic for specific illnesses. Of course, as you practice, sometimes you're with a teacher and sometimes you're not. When you're not with a teacher, you have to be your own doctor to figure out the illness, figure out what you might use as a medicine, and then look at the results. It's going to be experimental, but the Buddha does give some guidelines for judging the results of your experiments.

There's one passage where his stepmother comes and asks for a brief Dhamma teaching that she can take and practice, and he answers with eight principles as to what kind of actions, what kind of teachings, what kind of practices count as Dhamma and what kinds don't. They fall into three sets.

The first set has to do with qualities that you develop within you: contentment, "shedding," and persistence.

Contentment means learning to be satisfied with a situation. If it's good enough to practice in, it's good enough for you. We could probably think of all kinds of standards for judging this place as being deficient. It may not be the ideal place or your ideal place to meditate, but it's good enough. And if you can allow things outside to be good enough, then you can turn inside and see what's not good enough inside, because that's where the real problem lies.

As the Buddha said, the secret to his awakening was being not content with his own skillful qualities. That's where the effort should be. That's what the persistence is for, is to figure out how you can make yourself more skillful. This will involve making yourself want to do what's skillful even though you may not like it, and making yourself want to not do things that you like to do but are going to lead to bad consequences.

This ability to, as the Buddha says, *generate desire* is really important, because as he said, all things are rooted in desire. Unskillful things are rooted in desire. The path is rooted in desire. This means that you have to be discerning as to which desires to cultivate, which ones to nurture, and which ones you've got to cut off.

And your willingness to put effort in here is crucial. If you get lazy around this issue, then you've wandered off.

And finally there's shedding, as the Buddha calls it, basically shedding pride, shedding your conceit, shedding your sense of having been wronged by other people. We carry a lot of things around. In the Buddha's terms, we accumulate them, pile them up. They become our baggage. And when you can recognize something in your mind where you're carrying baggage around—old resentments, a sense of pride—you have to put them down. You begin to realize that you were weighing the mind down to no purpose. Even though you held onto these things tightly and cherished them, they really didn't help you.

That's the first set. These are qualities that have to do with your own practice and its impact on your mind, what kind of person you become as you practice: someone who's content, someone who has lots of persistence in the right direction, and someone who is unburdened by old resentments, old pride.

The second set has to do with the impact that your practice has on other people. For one, you don't go around bragging. Upasika Kee has a lot of Dhamma talks on this topic, about people who claim this attainment or that insight or this psychic power. And really, what your attainments are is nobody else's business. I noticed this when I was staying with Ajaan Fuang. He was very circumspect. I was strongly convinced that he was psychic in a lot of ways. Number one, it seemed he could read my mind, but number two, he seemed to know a lot of other things as well. But he never mentioned it. Once or twice something would slip out, but very, very rarely.

And then after he died, another monk moved into the place where he'd been staying when he went to Bangkok. He was a famous Dhamma teacher, and he would come to Bangkok to give Dhamma talks at Buddhist organizations around the city. He was constantly talking about seeing this and knowing that in his meditation, and it was repellent. I figured it was none of my business. And I wondered why he would be talking about those things anyhow. So whatever good qualities you have—these may not apply only to the meditation but other good qualities you have—you don't brag about them. You just go about your business modestly.

There's a great passage where the Buddha's talking to Sariputta and he points out a novice. He says, "See that novice over there? He's Anuruddha's disciple. Every day he takes Anuruddha's bowl and levitates to a lake up in the Himalayas to wash the bowl in clear water and comes back. And his main thought always is, 'May no one know about me.'" He's a good example to follow.

The second quality that has an impact on other people is that you try to be reclusive. You try not to get entangled with other people. Whatever work needs to be done in the monastery, you don't shirk your duties, but you learn how to do it with a minimum of chatter, a minimum of talk, a minimum of entanglement, because the more entangled you get, the less time you have to practice inside. And it usually happens, as we start working and chatting as we work, that the filter in our conversation gets wobbly, gets loose. Things get let through. After a while it's as if we have no security check on our speech. People can get through the gate with bombs and explosives. In other words, you start saying things and, without your even thinking about it, you get other people upset. Things you may think are okay to ask about or talk about are not okay for other people. So it's good to keep a tight control on what you say and the extent to which you do get entangled with others.

The final quality that has to do with your impact on others is that you try to be unburdensome. You carry your load as best you can. You try to make sure that your needs are few. This is one of the reasons that we work with the breath, because one of the ways a monk in particular can be burdensome to other people is needing to go see doctors, needing medicines, and yet you've got this medicine right here. So work with your breath. See what you can do with your breath. Ajaan Lee used to say that he would sit with a disease for three days to see if he could conquer the disease with his breath, and only after the third or fourth day would he think about seeing a doctor. So try to be light and unburdensome on other people.

The final two qualities that the Buddha taught to his stepmother have to do with the goal of the practice: being unfettered and being dispassionate.

"Unfettered" means the mind is free from all the ways we have of tying ourselves down, the things we identify with so strongly. Remember the Buddha's image of the fire: The fire is trapped in its fuel not because the fuel traps the fire, but because the fire holds onto the fuel. It's when the fire lets go that it's freed. The fuel just sits there. It's not clinging to the fire. In the same way, there are so many things we cling to, but they don't tie us down. We tie ourselves down. So when you can recognize a thought going through the mind that helps loosen up some of your attachments, encourage that thought.

Obviously, of course, letting go deals initially with unskillful thoughts. You hold on to the skillful ones as long as you need them. But there will come a point where even the skillful thoughts have to be let go. We have this fascination with our thinking, and it's good to step back from your thoughts and see them as

strange. See them as a process—where they come from, where they go—and don't get so infatuated with the content inside.

This connects directly with the final quality, which is dispassion. When you see the process, you begin to see how artificial it is, how much you've been fabricating your experience, how much energy goes into it, and how little you have to show for it. Think of the Buddha's image of the world—this was before he ordained. He saw the world as a puddle in which the fish are fighting over the water, pushing one another out of the way, and yet they're all going to die anyhow.

Years back, I was up in British Columbia. We were visiting a park, and it turned out to be the time the salmon were coming up to spawn. First they had to run the gauntlet. There was a beach through which a creek ran. On each side of the creek there were birds ready to peck out the eyes of the salmon. When the salmon finally got into the trees, the ones whose eyes weren't pecked out, there was a huge pile of other dead salmon there in the water, and the live ones were pushing one another out of the way over the dead ones. In the meantime, there were two bears next to the creek, scooping up as many salmon as they could.

That's life as we normally lead it. And it's good to have some dispassion for it, because we keep coming back, running the gauntlet through the beach, thinking we'll accomplish something when we've made it past the beach. But then there are the bears. You want to tell yourself that there must be something better than this. It's not the case that the Buddha just bad-mouths things to express his frustration with the world. He has us look at the negative side of things that we've been seeing in such a positive light because there's something much better.

So these are the qualities we're aiming at, and these are our tests. When people gain attainments, it's not that they should automatically say, "Oh, this must be it." The people who are really circumspect say, "I've got to watch this for a while." One of the reasons we work with the breath is so that we can learn the process of fabrication really carefully.

People sometimes ask, "When you focus on the breath as your meditation topic, what are you going to focus on as you die, when the breath leaves?" Well, you'll notice that Buddha's instructions on breath meditation deal not only with the breath but also with mental fabrication, and the instructions themselves are verbal fabrication. And in every case, you learn how to be sensitive to the extent to which you're fabricating things and learn how to do it more subtly, with more refinement. You still the fabrications. You calm the fabrications down.

And as you do that, you get more and more sensitive to ways in which you fabricate your experience that you don't recognize, until you see that even sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas are things you're fabricating, too.

There's some raw material from the outside. It's not that you're making things up totally, but what you experience is shaped a lot by your input. And as you get more and more sensitive to that, then when something unfabricated comes along, you recognize it as such. But still there's always the possibility that there might be something subtle in there, so you keep watching.

Everything gets tested. As the Buddha said, if you're honest, straightforward, and observant, you've got the qualities that are needed. Simply don't let the other things that are opposed to the Dhamma get in the way.