

Stay with the Knowing

December 25, 2020

Picking up a physical disease from someone else is one thing. Picking up anger from other people is something much worse. Physical disease at worst can kill you. But anger, when you pick it up, leads you to doing lots of unskillful things, saying unskillful things, thinking unskillful things—all of which can have a really bad effect even past death. So it's something you have to be very careful about.

It's all too easy to slip into it. There's a competitive side of the mind that has to be brought under control. I was talking to someone the other day who said that if people are bitchy to her, she wants to show them that she can be even more bitchy—as if that were a worthwhile contest. And that's part of the problem right there, thinking that you're losing out to someone else when they misbehave around you and you don't misbehave back. You've got to stop that thinking.

The Buddha's first line of defense is in the passage where he says that if someone says something really nasty to you, just tell yourself, "An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear," and just leave it there at the contact. Don't bring it in. If you bring it in, it turns into lots of narratives: "Why did that person say that? Why do they disrespect you? How can you get back?" You can create huge issues around it. Whereas if you just leave it at the contact, then you have time to stop and think of an appropriate response—a skillful response that doesn't involve bad karma. So give the mind some space.

This is why the *ajānas* talk about being with the knowing. In other words, you stop things right at the contact. Notice, that's being *with*. They don't say to *be* the knowing, and they certainly don't say that this is equivalent to awakening, which you sometimes hear. Literally, they actually say to *stay* at the knowing. And they're very clear that this is not the awakened state. It's simply a pause so that you can see what your normal reactions might be and not go with the normal reactions. That's how you stay with the knowing. You're trying to retrain the mind. And the hardest parts of the mind to retrain are the ones where you think you know what to say, you know what to do, and it's going to be unskillful. And you don't care.

You've just got to stop the mind there and say, "Nope, not going to go there." And watch it as it goes out and then stops. You see that this current of the mind that goes running out needs you to run after it in order to keep going. It's like going out on a foggy night and shining a flashlight into the fog. You try to see how far the beam of the flashlight goes, and you just follow, follow, follow, follow. Of

course, as you follow, the end of the beam goes further and further away. But if you just stay right here, it goes away only so far and then it stops.

So get some practice with that. Whatever comes up in the mind, be slow to react in your normal way. Be quicker to react with that reminder to just stay with the knowing. For the time being, you're not going to do anything. This doesn't mean that you'll never do anything, but you have to learn this response first because it goes against the grain. I think I've told you about how, when I studied Thai boxing, the very first thing I was taught was how to pull away from the opponent. In other words, you realize that you're in a position of weakness, you've got to get out, and you get out in a way that keeps you defended. In other words, you don't just run. You pull back, but you maintain your defense.

Here your defense is, "I'm not going to act on anything unskillful." Then you can see what the mind offers to say. It'll offer its usual reactions: "The other person will think you're weak," or "The other person will think you're dumb." You've got to learn that there are times when it's good to be weak, good to be dumb, because if you show your strength, then you show your, quote-unquote, "intelligence," It's going to get you in a lot of trouble.

Think about being a good warrior. The warrior knows which battles to fight and which ones are not worth fighting. He or she may look weak in not fighting those other ones, but you have to remember you're not here to be concerned about other people's impression of you, especially the type of impression where they're going to measure you by how weak you are and how clever you are in fighting. That's not a contest to get involved in at all. There are better things to do with your time. In fact, that's one of the things you should start thinking about: "What would be the best thing to do with my time right now?" This is why the Buddha gives you so many examples of why it's good not to go running out after your anger.

There's a nice story. The devas are up in their heaven, and an ugly, deformed dwarf demon suddenly appears. He goes and sits on Sakka's throne, and the other devas are upset. Here's the throne of the deva-king they respect so much. How can this ugly demon get there? So they complain. And the more they complain, the stronger and better looking the dwarf becomes. They're confused. So they go to find where Sakka is. They tell him about this, and he says, "Oh, that's an anger-eating demon."

So Sakka goes and bows down to the demon and shows him respect. The more respect he shows to the demon, the more the demon shrivels up, shrivels up, shrivels up, and finally disappears. In other words, when someone is coming at you

with anger, they're going to try to feed off your anger. But if you don't give them any anger to feed off, they shrivel up. That's one thing to keep in mind.

Then there's the question of what your karma's going to be. There are so many battles fought in the world that are totally useless. What happens, of course, is that people end up creating a lot of karma. Then they carry the karma with them, while whatever victory they won is left behind. It's totally meaningless.

Learn how to draw on the Buddha's teachings about anger and remind yourself that they're not just pleasant platitudes. They're meant to be used. Take that reflection the Buddha has: When you act on anger, you're going to say or do something really stupid and self-destructive, and that's going to please your enemy. Do you want to please your enemy? Well, no. That may not be the most skillful thought, but at least it's better than acting on the anger. You're using your spite to peel away the mind's attraction to the anger to help you see that when you give in to your anger, you really have lost. You may win the battle with the other person, but you've lost as far as the well-being of the mind is concerned.

So learn how to train the mind to stay at that spot where it's just aware, just staying with the awareness. And learn how to use that position of staying with the awareness strategically. It's useful in all kinds of things, not just dealing with anger but also dealing with any bad habit, both outside and in. After all, when you meditate, things are going to come up. Bad things will come up, but if you run with them, they eat you up. Good things will come up, but if you get all excited about them, you lose them. So you should have that attitude, "What's coming up? What is this?" Watch it for a while before you jump to conclusions.

There's that passage where the Buddha talks about people who touch something that seems really amazing in the meditation, and their first thought is, "I've made it. I got there." And that thought, of course, keeps them from getting there. The proper thought is, "There's this." That holds you back from your normal reactions and puts you in a position where you can watch and not ruin what you're doing.

Think of this as the attitude of a skilled craftsman. You watch what you're doing. This doesn't mean you don't do anything at all, but you watch what you're doing with an objective eye. If you see you've made a mistake, you can do something about it right away. It's the same way as you go through life. Think of life as a skill that you're trying to master, and you have to be objective. Notice when you made a mistake. Notice when there's something that's going to get in the way of doing it right. To do that, you've got to step back.

So try to develop this position of just staying with the knowing. It *is* a form of becoming, but it's a useful form of becoming. It allows you to see a lot of things

that other forms of becoming don't. In particular, it pulls you back a little bit from your knee-jerk reactions and especially from the knee-jerk reactions where you're totally confident that you know what to do—and you're going to show them that you know what to do. Oftentimes, those are the worst mistakes you can make. In this way, you don't pick up the germs of other people's anger, and you get some control over the germs of your own anger. After all, you can't blame everything on other people. They may be looking for trouble, but your mind tends to look for trouble, too.

That's the whole point of the Buddha's teachings on the four noble truths. The mind goes looking for trouble and then it blames other people. But your craving, your clinging, and your ignorance: Those are the causes of your suffering. You can't blame them on anybody else. You can't say, "I was born without craving and without clinging. People taught me craving and clinging." They may have given you some examples, but if you didn't have the germs of those things inside you, you wouldn't have responded in that way.

So develop this stance of staying at the knowing, and it'll help you deal skillfully with a lot of problems, both inside and out.