

## *The Dhamma Points Inside*

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The Buddha recommends two things to do after you've heard the Dhamma and while you're listening to the Dhamma: You ask yourself, "How does this apply to my mind?" In particular, "How does this apply to the problem of my mind, in which I'm creating suffering for myself?"

It's called appropriate attention. You take the lessons you learn from the Dhamma that you've heard in talks, and also from the Dhamma you notice just as you go through the day, and you apply them to this problem of suffering.

There was a famous incident in Ajaan Mun's life. There was a senior monk from Bangkok who was not all that impressed with the Forest Tradition. His teacher *was*, so his teacher would drag him to the Northeast, to pay respects to Ajaan Mun and the other forest ajaans. Yet still this city monk was not all that impressed. His attitude was that if you wanted to hear the Dhamma, you had to be in Bangkok. That was where all the well-educated Dhamma speakers were.

So he asked Ajaan Mun, "Here you are out in the woods: Where do you get to hear the Dhamma?" Ajaan Mun's response was, "I hear it twenty-four hours a day, except for when I'm asleep. A leaf falls—it's a lesson in impermanence. An animal cries—you reflect on suffering. So there are Dhamma lessons all around." The monk from Bangkok, chastened, said, "Well, obviously you know how to listen."

So as a meditator, you want to learn how to listen to the Dhamma, too. You can ask yourself, "What in this Dhamma talk that I'm listening to applies to my problem of suffering?" When you see someone else creating suffering, you ask yourself, "To what extent do I do it the same way?"

When you're looking outside, you want to bring it inside. When you're listening outside, you want to bring it inside, because this is what the real Dhamma is—it's inside.

We tend to think that the Dhamma's out there in the words that the Buddha left behind, the ajaans left behind, but those are just reflections on the Dhamma: *pointers* to the Dhamma.

There's a Pali term, *dhamma-desana*, which they use for Dhamma talk. *Desana* literally means to *point out*. The words *point* to the Dhamma, but the Dhamma's a quality of the

heart, so they're pointing your attention into the heart.

We're trying to train the heart so that it's not so rough with itself. It creates a lot of issues, and the issues come back to stab it. The Buddha has an analysis of this habit—what he calls *papañca*.

Sometimes *papañca* is translated as “mental proliferation,” meaning that your thoughts run rampant all over the place. When people nowadays talk about having a *papañca* attack, they mean they got started thinking about a topic and they couldn't stop. But that's not what the Buddha's talking about. The way he uses the term *papañca*, it's not a question of how much thinking there is. It's more a *type* of thinking, based on a type of perception, using certain types of terms. They start out with the perception, “I am the thinker.” With that perception, you create a sense of who you are as a being.

A being has to feed, so you need your territory, and most beings want to expand their territory as far as they can. If anyone moves in on their territory, there are going to be problems. So immediately, with *papañca*, you're creating the basis for conflict.

As the Buddha said, this is where conflict comes from—this kind of thinking. Once there's the *me* and the *I*, and the *I am*, and *I am the being*; *I've* got to feed, *I* need food, then you're going to run into other beings who are also looking for food.

This is one of the reasons why, when we meditate, we pull inside. We realize that as we look for food outside, those concepts we use come back and stab us. Or as the Buddha says, they come back and they *assail* us.

In his analysis, we start simply with a moment of sensory contact. Then there's a feeling. And then there's someone who feels the feeling, and then someone who perceives the feeling and then thinks about it and then gets involved in these concepts. Then the concepts of *papañca* come back and *assail* them.

So you want to look into the concepts that you hold onto. To what extent do they assail you? What problems do they cause? As the Buddha says, again and again, the horrible things that other people can do to us are nothing compared to the suffering we cause for ourselves.

So why are we so rough with ourselves? Because we have other ideas of where happiness will lie: in defending our territory. So we have to look inside. One of the reasons why we practice concentration is to cultivate some territory inside that's really ours, where there doesn't have to be any conflict.

You focus on the breath: You don't have to push anyone out of the way who's already trying

to look at your breath. It's totally yours to look at. Your sense of the body that you feel from within: No one else can feel that. If you can find some well-being here, then you don't feel the need to go out and lay claim to things outside. What you want out of other people, how you want them to think about you: All those things—just leave them alone.

Ajaan Lee talks about this again and again: The words of other people—that's their karma. The thoughts of other people—that's their karma. Your karma has to do with how you're looking for happiness: how responsible you are, how wise. To what extent does your search for happiness create trouble for other people? To what extent does it create trouble for you?

As long as you have no other alternative, you're going to resent these questions. But if you have this alternative inside—simply by the way you breathe, by the way you let the breath energy go through the body—you can find some happiness that's totally harmless. Then you can look at your other ways of looking for happiness outside, and you realize that they cause a lot of trouble. You begin to realize there are a lot of issues out there you just don't have to get involved in.

Think of the Buddha: The big issues of his time had to do with the nature of the world. Was the world finite or infinite? Eternal or non-eternal? How about your identity: Are you identical with your body, or are you something separate from your body? Those kinds of things. People would come and ask these questions of the Buddha, and they'd usually come prepared to argue with whichever of those positions he would take. Yet he always refused to take any position on those questions.

In the texts, you can see these people feeling frustrated. They even accused him of not teaching anything at all. But as one of his students pointed out, though, No, the Buddha was very clear on one issue: what's skillful and what's not skillful—in other words, what leads to the end of suffering and what creates more suffering. That's the question that has to be asked. That's the question that matters. And that's the question he answered.

The Buddha was very harsh with people who would not answer that question. It's not the case that he wouldn't take a stance on anything, or that he praised people for not taking a stance on anything. He said that you had to take a stance on what's skillful and what's not, because that issue determines how you act and what kind of impact your actions are going to have on other people. That matters.

But as for questions outside of that, why bother? They're just turf battles over AstroTurf. In other words, you can't even eat the grass.

So as you look for happiness inside, you can look back at the world and realize: This is why the Buddha had such compassion for the world. As he said after his awakening, he looked around and he saw beings on fire with the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion. He felt compassion, because he'd been there, but now he was out.

That's how you have to treat people who are insistent on still getting into battles. You don't have to engage them in battles, but you do have compassion for them.

That's how you can learn how to live in this world and not have to suffer from it. Because you're not looking for your happiness in the world—you're looking for it through the skills you can develop inside.