

## *Training Your Inner Teacher*

*February 13, 2021*

The Buddha lists four qualities you develop that lead to stream entry. The first is associating with people of integrity, the second is listening to the True Dhamma, the third is appropriate attention, and the fourth is practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. Now, assuming that you're listening to the True Dhamma, your main duties are those last two: appropriate attention and practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma.

Appropriate attention means looking at your actions while listening to the talk, seeing how the talk applies to your actions, particularly actions that are skillful and unskillful. What does the talk have to say about them? How does it apply to what you're doing; where your weaknesses are; where your strengths are? Then you can go further, into looking into: What does the talk have to tell you about how you're creating suffering for yourself where you don't have to, and what you can do about it.

So it's always good to reflect, when you hear the Dhamma: "How does this apply to me, to what I'm doing right now?" And of course, "right now" doesn't mean only while you're sitting here listening to the talk, but also as you go through the day. This is where that third factor moves into the fourth: practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. How do you stick with it all the time?

That was the teaching that Ajaan Mun gave to Ajaan Chah during the short time when Ajaan Chah was with him. He said, "Make your practice like a circle." A circle has no end; it's all around. In other words, you don't do it just little bits and pieces here and there, and then do something else, and then come back. Even as you go through the day and have your other responsibilities, you should make it part of the practice.

Ajaan Chah took that and thought about it. He came up with the image of a fence around a house. If there are big holes in the fence, then no matter how strong the fence is on one side, if there are holes in the back, thieves can still get in. You've got to make sure the fence is solid and impenetrable all around. That's when it serves its function as a fence.

So how do you do that as you go through the day? Ajaan Fuang's recommendation was you think of part of the mind as being like a teacher who keeps the students at their tasks, watches over them, gives them encouragement when need be, but makes sure they get the work done.

And one of the things he recommended is, if you think about being mindful all day long, and you just get lost in the thought of “all day”—in other words, it’s too big to think about—divide it up to begin with. When you wake up, you say, “Okay, from now until the time I go to the kitchen—or the time I go to the dining hall—I’m going to be as mindful as possible.” Then, when you’ve arrived at the kitchen or the dining hall: “Okay, now as long as I’m here, until things are cleaned up, I’m going to be mindful.” After things are cleaned up: “As I go back to my hut, I’m going to be mindful.”

In other words, set proximate goals for yourself. But make sure they’re pretty consistent—in other words, that they connect. And the fact that you’ve divided time up into segments like this means that it’s easier to be strict with yourself, and say, “Okay, it’s not that long an amount of time: an hour or so; two hours.” And then ultimately, as you can deal with those segments and connect them, you realize you’ve got the whole day covered.

It’s the same with doing walking meditation. If you just think, “Okay, I’m going to be mindful for the entire hour that I’m doing walking meditation,” you get lost pretty quickly. But if you’re standing at one end of the path and say, “Okay, from here to the other end, I’m going to be as mindful as possible”; when you get to the other end, turn around, “Okay, from here to the other end, I’m going to be as mindful as possible,” for each segment of the path, then you find that those little periods of mindfulness connect up. That way, it’s easier to keep the mind on a close leash, so that it doesn’t wander too far off. If it does wander off by the time you’ve got to the other end of the path, you stop and say, “Okay, come back. I’m not going anywhere until you come back.” Then you go to the other end of the path.

What this means is that you’ve got to train your inner teacher. There’s a double training going on: The teacher’s going to train the student—i.e. the mind—but then, of course, there’s part of the mind that’s going to act as the teacher. The teacher has to learn how to deal with the student: when to give the student a little bit of slack; when to tighten up the leash; when to be stern; when to have a sense of humor. Try to think of all the good qualities of the teachers you’ve had in the past—the teachers from whom you learned things, the teachers who made you *want* to learn—and try to embody their qualities in the way you teach yourself as you go through the day.

That way, the Dhamma becomes something you actually do practice in accordance with the Dhamma. Because there’s nothing in the practice that says, “You do this only for a certain amount of time, and then you rest, and then you do it for another little bit of time, and then you rest.” The purpose is to do this as

continuously as possible, because your mind can slip out at any time at all and create a lot of trouble for itself. It's not only while you're here meditating that you realize, "Oh, I've got defilements. Oh, I've got hindrances." They're there in the mind all the time. They can happen at any time. So you want to be ready for them at any time.

The Buddha calls this "directing yourself rightly." And as with any trip, you want to make sure that every step you take is toward the goal. You don't want to go east for a while, and then go back west for a while, and then go east again, and then west again; back and forth. The mind will have its ups and downs, but you have to learn how to deal with it when it has its downs, so that it can get back up as quickly as possible. And as I said, sometimes this requires being stern, sometimes it requires a little bit of humor.

The Buddha talks about how he would instruct, urge, encourage, and rouse his listeners. The instruction there is for when you have to say, "Look"—you lay down the line—"this is the way it's got to be." The others are basically the more positive side. When you urge the mind: "Please do this; this is for your own good." You encourage it: "Yes, you can do this." You rouse it: When it's feeling depressed, feeling that it's going nowhere, you give rise to that sense of pride, that "Yes, I can do this, and it's worth doing."

So learn how to use all those tactics as you teach yourself as you look after your practice, and make sure that your practice is in line with the Dhamma. That way, it develops that quality of timelessness. Because after all, you're looking for something timeless. And the best way to find something timeless is to be as timeless as possible in your alertness, timeless as possible in your mindfulness, timeless as possible in your efforts—*timely* in the sense that you make them appropriate, but timeless in the sense that you make them consistent. That's how you carry out your responsibility: your responsibility to yourself.

You've got this opportunity to practice, and it's always the case that you never know how much longer you've got. But you want to develop the momentum so that if you don't get to the end in this lifetime, the momentum will carry you through to a place where you can practice again. And who knows: If you get really good at the practice, even at the moment of death it is possible to gain awakening. You realize you've got to let go. The question is: What are you going to hold on to next? And you ask yourself, "Why do I have to hold on?" Now, if you've had practice letting go, letting go, letting go, it's going to be a lot easier. And if you've had practice watching your mind, which is that role of the inner teacher—watching things and saying, "No, don't go there; do this; don't do that"—you're more likely to do the right thing.

Ajaan Fuang said—and many of the ajaans have said—that when you meditate, it’s practice for how to die well, because these are precisely the skills you’re going to need: not letting the mind wander off uncontrolled, being mindful to remember what your duties are, being alert to what’s happening, and putting up the effort to do things well. Those are the qualities we need as we meditate, those are the qualities we need as we go through the day, and the qualities we need as life approaches death. So whatever effort you put into developing them, it’s all well spent. And it’ll see you through all kinds of difficulties.

The Buddha talks about one of the duties of a teacher being to give protection to the student. So try to make sure that your inner teacher gives you just that protection. Don’t be afraid of being critical. I don’t know how many articles I’ve read in supposed Buddhist magazines saying, “Oh, your inner critic is horrible; make sure that your inner critic doesn’t have anything to say; don’t listen to the inner critic”—as if there were no such things as positive criticism, useful criticism. Being a helpful critic is one of the roles of the teacher. That’s part of the “instructing” in those four types of talk: instructing, rousing, urging, and encouraging. Simply teach your teacher how to be a useful critic, a positive critic. And teach your teacher to have those other skills as well: learning how to encourage you when you need to be encouraged, urged when you need to be urged, roused when you need to be roused.

Then you will have developed a refuge inside. Because after all, what is the Dhamma as a refuge? It’s establishing mindfulness. And this inner teacher is precisely what you need to get mindfulness established to begin with, and to keep it there, where you can depend on it all the time.