

Pay Careful Attention

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We live in a culture where people tend to be careless about what they say—saying things that are not true, saying things that are divisive, saying things with the intention of hurting other people’s feelings, or just opening their mouths and saying whatever comes out—all of which are forms of wrong speech. When people are careless of what they say, we tend to get careless in how we listen, which is a habit we have to overcome because when we approach the Buddha’s teachings. He would say, at the beginning of every talk, “Listen and pay careful attention.” If you want to know the Dhamma, and if you want to know its meaning, its *attha*, you have to first be sure that you’ve listened well. This is a theme that Ajaan Fuang liked to repeat: Those who listen well gain discernment, because when you listen well, you’re actively engaging your mind.

The Buddha himself said that when you listen, try to focus your attention so that your mind is one with the topic that’s being discussed. In other words, it’s gathered in oneness around it. And then, he said, apply appropriate attention. Think about, “How does this apply to the problem of suffering and the end of suffering? What is it telling me to do?” Then you have to ask yourself, “How do I check if it’s genuine Dhamma or not?” That’s another detrimental aspect of our culture: The idea that there is a true Dhamma seems to have died.

The Buddha himself said that the true Dhamma would disappear when counterfeit Dhamma came about, in the same way that genuine money disappears when counterfeit money is introduced into a market. Genuine money is still there, but you get distrustful of all money. In the same way, when counterfeit Dhamma comes, there would still be true Dhamma around, but you wouldn’t know for sure which was which. You couldn’t be confident listening to the Dhamma that it was the genuine article. The Buddha himself said the way to know true Dhamma is to test it. He himself lived in a time when there was true Dhamma, but there were a lot of opportunities for misreporting.

You’ve probably heard reports about what the Buddha said on how to check for true Dhamma. He said, one: Is it consistent with what you’ve already heard of what the Buddha said? And two: When you put it into practice, what results do you get? When he talked with the Kalamas, the question was basically: If you take a teaching and put it into practice, does it lead to what’s skillful and harmless? Or does it lead to harm? That’s the most basic test.

The Buddha went into more detail with his stepmother. After her ordination, she came and asked him, “Teach me the Dhamma in brief so I can take it and practice.” He taught her principles for telling what was genuine Dhamma, what was not. You listen, you try to understand the meaning, and then you put it to the test. That relates to the two meanings of the word *attha*, or “meaning,” in Pali.

One is the meaning in terms of words. When you say something and it's not clear, how would you rephrase in words that would make it clear? Or how would you rephrase it in words that would help you understand how to put it into practice? Translating words into words: that's one way of getting at the *attha* of a phrase, a piece of Dhamma.

The other meaning of *attha*, though, is that you actually experience the goal to which this is all aimed. That's another kind of *attha* entirely.

This relates to the two meanings of the word truth, *sacca*, in Pali. One is a true statement, and the other is the actual truth of a situation.

You can say things about a situation that are true, as when the Buddha said to speak the truth. But then there are actual situations, the actual qualities in the mind that are truly there. The fact that they're truly there, your experience of their being truly there: That's the second kind of truth.

For instance, with the four noble truths, the Buddha said to comprehend the first truth, to abandon the second, to realize the third, and to develop the fourth. Now, he's not saying to abandon words about the cause of suffering. He's not saying to develop words about the path to the end of suffering. He's telling you to abandon the reality of the cause, to develop the reality of the path.

That's what we're aiming at as we think about the *attha* of the Dhamma: the reality to which the words aim. But to get there, first you have to listen carefully, because you can misunderstand the words, and that will skew your practice.

When I was first reading Ajaan Lee's instructions on breath meditation, I came across a passage where he says to take the breath syllable, *buddho*, and make the syllable equal to the length of the breath: “*thao kan*” in Thai. But I misread it. I read *thao nan*, and thought it meant that you use the breath syllable only with a long breath, and not with a short one. So that's what I did. Now that wasn't too serious a mistake. I was still able to get the mind to settle down that way. But when I went back and read it afterwards, I realized, “Oh, I made a mistake.” That made me realize that I could have made more serious mistakes. So I listened more carefully, read more carefully, thought more carefully about what the implications would be.

Even more so when Ajaan Fuang had me translate Ajaan Lee: I had to think very carefully about what each sentence meant. At first I got the basic meaning

down. But when you're translating, you have to go beyond just the basic meaning. You have to get very precise to catch the nuances. And in making that extra effort, it opened up a lot in my understanding of Ajaan Lee's teachings.

So as you listen to the Dhamma, as you read the Dhamma, listen carefully, read carefully, because you're going to have to practice carefully. What you do, say, and think will make a difference because you're being charged with putting the true Dhamma to the test.

We live in a culture, as I said, where the idea of true Dhamma is dying, and all kinds of things are being taught. The Buddha said that within 500 years after he passed away, the true Dhamma would disappear. That's about the same time as the teaching on the non-arising of dhammas arose: the teaching that things seem to arise and pass away, but they don't really. Everything is just an unchanging oneness. Of course, if that were true, then the four noble truths would not be true. But now we're told that we have to be open in accepting all versions of the Dhamma, and that it's narrow-minded to think that one is right and another is wrong. But when different versions tell you to do different things, how can you accept both?

The way out is to follow the Buddha's way. One, look for a teaching that you actually can put into practice. A teaching that tells you that nothing arises and nothing passes away is not one you can test, because any action to test it would be illusory according to what that teaching has to say. So that fact right there rules that teaching out.

But there are other teachings of the Dhamma that are not so easily ruled out. You're going to have to test them, starting with the teachings that seem most likely. This is where you have to think about the Buddha's teaching on the factors for stream entry. You start by finding a person of integrity and then you listen to the true Dhamma. Then you apply appropriate attention, asking how this teaching applies to the problem of suffering, the cause of suffering, or the end of suffering. Then you practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma as you've understood it, for the sake of dispassion, for the sake of being unfettered. Those were two of the tests that the Buddha gave to his stepmother: True Dhamma, when you practice it, should lead to dispassion and being unfettered.

But to practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma, you've first got to listen carefully to what it says. Think it through in all sincerity, because your truthfulness is going to be a huge factor in testing the truth of the Dhamma Dhamma. You have to be true in listening, true in thinking, and true in putting it into the practice. That's how you arrive at the truth.

So the lesson all the way through is, “Be careful. Take care.” Try to get things right, right from the very beginning, and that will develop the habits that you’re going to need to get things right all the way through.