

## *A Message for the Universe*

*December 3, 2021*

There's a story they tell in the Canon, in the time of a previous Buddha who had a talented student, named Abhibhu, who had very strong psychic powers. One day that Buddha turned to his student and said, "Let's go to the Brahma world before lunch." Kind of like, "Let's zip down to Escondido before lunch." So they zipped up to the Brahma world, and then Abhibhu started teaching the Dhamma. The Brahmans were upset and said, "Why is the student teaching us? Why don't we have the teacher teaching us?" And the Buddha said that the student was talented.

So Abhibhu showed some of his talent. He'd disappear and then re-appear. Then the upper half of his body would disappear, but the lower half of his body would appear, and then visa-versa. After he'd showed off his powers, the Brahmans were willing to listen.

The Buddha said to Abhibhu, "Make your voice so that the whole universe can hear it." So Abhibhu thought for a bit about what to say to the whole universe, and the message he came up with was basically: "Exert yourself, strive, commit yourself to the practice. Crush your defilements as an elephant would crush a house made out of reeds."

It's interesting that that would be a message for the whole universe: strive, exert, commit. But after all, if anything is going to be accomplished in this life, it has to come through effort. The end of suffering is also through effort. It's through suffering through a difficult practice sometimes, that you do get release from suffering.

We don't like to hear this, but it's a message for the whole universe, that if you don't put forth an effort, you're just going to be riding on the results of your past efforts, and after a while they're going to run out. So you have to look at yourself: "What do I have to deal with right now? What kind of effort is appropriate?"

The Buddha, of course, defines four kinds of right effort. You can work on preventing unskillful thoughts from arising, or if they have arisen, you can work on abandoning them. As for skillful mental qualities, if they're not there, try to give rise to them. If they're already there, try to maintain them and develop them further.

Our problem is that we tend to sit with our unskillful thoughts—they're "okay." They're creating a lot of trouble for ourselves and for the people around us, and yet for some reason we

feel that “This is simply the way I am, so this is the way I have to be.”

That attitude, the Buddha said, blocks the path, because you’re basically denying that you can change and that it would be worth the effort to change. Yet the whole reason the Buddha taught was because it *is* worth the effort to change. And it can be done. You can give rise to skillful ways of thinking to replace your unskillful ones.

The first thing, of course, is to recognize your unskillful thoughts *as* unskillful thoughts. Here again, there’s the attitude, “Well, this is the way I see things.” If the way you see things were right, you wouldn’t have any defilements. You wouldn’t have any suffering. So as long as you’re suffering, you’re not seeing things rightly.

This is one of the reasons why we work with perceptions in our meditation. The Buddha talks about calming bodily fabrication and calming mental fabrication. Calming bodily fabrication requires basically calming the way you breathe. Calming the way you breathe, you begin to realize, is going to depend on how you perceive the breath energy in the body. What are the images you use? Which images are useful?

Ajaan Lee gives a series of useful perceptions in his seven steps, but then you look at his Dhamma talks, and you can see that he has lots of other ways of perceiving the breath energy as well. So there’s no one “right way” of looking at the breath energy. But there are ways that are right for specific problems, and learning them is part of your repertoire as a meditator.

Then the Buddha says to calm mental fabrication. That’s basically calming your perceptions and feelings. For the purpose of meditation, you’re trying to perceive pain in a way that it doesn’t impinge on you, that it doesn’t form a block. But sometimes even before you can settle down in concentration, you’ve got to change your perceptions about your daily life, the people you associate with. And you have to learn how to question those perceptions, because if you’re carrying them into your attitude right now, they’re going to get in the way.

If you think about what this person did, or what that person did, or that this person means ill to you, that person means ill to you, so it’s a reason to dismiss them: That just stirs up the mind. You have to ask yourself, “Maybe I’m perceiving things wrong?”

Well, what would a more accurate way of perceiving things be? What would be a more *useful* way of perceiving things? What would be more conducive to getting the mind to settle down? Remember, we’re doing all of this in the context of the four noble truths, and the four noble truths basically say that the reason you’re suffering is because of actions coming from within. Those actions are composed of perceptions, feelings, intentions, ways of paying

attention. So you've got to be willing to question them, because otherwise you're just going to hold on, and nothing's going to change.

You can get great states of concentration, but they need to chip away at your solid attitudes if they're going to make a difference. Ajaan Fuang had a student who was very talented in concentration. She could settle down, get her mind quiet really quickly, very firmly, but it was concentration without discernment. She actually needed somebody there to remind her to come out, her mind was so blank when it got into concentration, so unthinking.

She once complained to Ajaan Fuang, saying, "I don't see how my meditation is helping me in my daily life. Sometimes my anger seems to be worse." That was because she'd compartmentalized things. There was the concentration practice, and then when she left it, she left it totally.

You have to be willing to take the lessons from the meditation and apply them to your daily life. And one of the lessons you've got to learn is that if your perceptions are causing suffering, you've got to change your perceptions. No matter how real they may seem, no matter how true they may seem, they're not what you want. You should try to find perceptions that help put an end to suffering.

We talk often about seeing things in terms of the four noble truths, but it really does require a radical reordering of the way you think and the way you act— what you see as important, what you see as worth putting aside, and your sense of what's really going on.

As the Buddha said, inappropriate attention looks at the same things as appropriate attention, but it focuses on different details. The details may be true, but they're not helpful. You've got to look for details that are true, beneficial, and timely.

Remember the Buddha's standards for what would be right speech, the kind of speech that he would say: It had to be true, and then it had to be beneficial. If it was true but not beneficial, he'd put it aside. He wouldn't say it. But if it was true and beneficial, then the next question was: Is this the right time and place for that? And if it didn't pass that test, then he'd put that aside, too.

What's interesting is that when he goes through the different permutations of these options, the idea that something could be false but beneficial was not even entertained. But notice, also, that there were a lot of true things that he put aside, or things that at least seemed true, but if they were not beneficial, why bother? And if it's not worth speaking, then it's not even worth thinking.

So when you really strive in the practice, it really does seriously mean that you've got to change the way you look at things. You've got to change your sense of reality—come at it with a different set of questions.

The questions are: Where is the suffering here? What's causing the suffering? What can be done to abandon the cause? What can be done to comprehend the suffering so that you can realize its cessation?

As the Buddha said, you've got to develop the factors of the path, which include right view. And an important part of right view is goodwill. There's one place where he actually says that if you have ill will for other people, that's wrong view. If you think any purpose is served by ill will, that's wrong view.

And look at the part of the mind that resists changing your habits, because if it resists changing in the direction of the Dhamma, it's a defilement—no matter how insistent it is that it's right.

In fact, the really resistant thoughts are the hard-shelled defilements that you've got to learn how to crack somehow.

So that message of Abhibhu—"Strive, exert yourself, commit yourself to the practice": That was his message to the universe. And where were we at that time? Apparently we could have heard it someplace in the universe, but we let it go past.

You have to ask yourself: "How many more eons are you going to let this message go past, and how much more suffering are you going to create in the meantime?" Look for the part of the mind that says you've had enough. It's time to change. That's a skillful intention, and you don't want it to just arise and pass away. You want it to be the beginning of something good.