

The Dhamma Is in the Method

June 21, 2022

It's the solstice. It's bright enough outside that the woodpeckers are still squawking. This is the day of the year, one of the two days of the year, when the sun stands still. So try to get your mind still as well. Try to bring things into balance inside. Look at your mind. Look at your body. Look at your posture. Make sure your spine is straight, balanced, not leaning to the right, left, forward, or back. Then make sure that your mind is not leaning.

The Thai ajaans use this image a lot. Leaning forward, of course, means leaning into thoughts of the future. Leaning back means leaning into thoughts of the past. Left and right are things you like and don't like.

Just try to be aware in the middle.

But awareness itself is not enough. It's the beginning. You want to be able to watch your mind thoroughly. You give it a task. Remember that basic principle: You commit and then you reflect. This is, in short, the method of the Dhamma. Just as science has a method, the Dhamma has a method, too. In the case of science, the scientific method is what ties everything together. The knowledge we gain from that method tends to vary over time. People think they've proven something, and then another generation comes along and says, "No, that's not quite right." Things have to be adjusted or thrown out entirely. So the content changes, but the method stays the same. It's simply a matter of learning how to apply it better and better, with more and more finesse, with more and more imagination.

One of the ironies of science is that many scientists believe in strict determinism. But if you really believed in strict determinism, there would be no way to conduct the scientific method. You couldn't criticise someone for having designed a poor experiment because he or she was determined to design it that way. And the designing of the experiment wouldn't have anything to do with how things came out anyhow. So, one of the assumptions of the scientific method is that people can make choices, and choosing to do different things will have a different impact on the world around you. And in experimenting by doing different things, you'll learn about the causal relationships between things. But the really important thing is the method.

It's the same with the practice. We can learn a lot of Dhamma. We think we have lots of understanding about what the four noble truths mean, all the different wings to awakening. You may have the concepts down, but you don't really know them until you've applied the method. In other words, you try something out. Before you act, you ask yourself, "What do you expect to be the result?" If you expect any harm, you don't do it. While you're doing it, you

look to see if any harm is coming up. If there is, you stop. If there's not, you can continue. When you're done, you reflect on the long term. When you've acted on that particular assumption, what were the results that came? If they were not good, what should you do to change? You've got to go back and look at those assumptions.

This is how we take our book knowledge of the Dhamma, and the knowledge that we gained through thinking things through, and we actually learn it in a new way by trying to develop good qualities in the mind.

So wherever you go, remember: Apply the method. There may be points of Dhamma that you're one hundred percent sure you understand. You've really got to test them as you put them into practice.

The forest ajaans, again, make a lot of this. They say it's like learning military science. You can draw diagrams at the blackboard, analyse old battles to see what lessons you can learn. But then, when you go into battle yourself, you find it's a very different experience. You've got to learn how to think on your feet, test things. If they don't work out, you've got to use your imagination, use your ingenuity, to come up with a new approach. That's when the Dhamma becomes yours. And you know it's Dhamma because it gives good results.

This is why the teaching on kamma is such a basic part of the teaching: In other words, your actions will give results based on your intentions, but also on principles of cause and effect. They follow a pattern, enough of a pattern so you can learn from the pattern. But you've got to do things again and again and again so that the pattern becomes clear.

This is why we meditate again and again, because the mind is pretty complex. Sometimes a method that works today won't work tomorrow. The fact that it doesn't work tomorrow doesn't necessarily mean that it's bad or that you weren't observant today, simply that the conditions tomorrow are different. Your mind is in a different shape. Your body is in a different shape. So, you have to test things again and again in lots of different situations.

The Buddha gives some standards for judging how well the test goes. You're going to learn these standards first by hearing about them. Then you're going to come to appreciate them as you try to apply them. They're in that list that he used to teach his stepmother. The two main standards have to do with the goal of the practice: We're trying to practice for dispassion and for being unfettered. Being unfettered means that the mind is released. It's interesting those two standards go together: You gain freedom through dispassion. That's looking for freedom in a place where we ordinarily might not think of looking.

But think of the Buddha's prescription for how you bring about dispassion and free the mind. You look at things as they arise, to see what their origination is. You look at them as they pass away. You look to see what their

allure is, what their drawbacks are. When you can compare the allure and the drawbacks until you can see that the allure is false, or it's certainly not worth all the drawbacks, then you can let go through dispassion. As you do that, you basically grow up.

The word *dispassion* doesn't sound all that good. It sounds like you're dead. But that's not what the Buddha means. It's basically maturing. It's like seeing a game that you used to play, and it no longer holds any fascination. Like tic-tac-toe: As the child, when you haven't figured out what the best moves are, you can keep playing it again and again and again. But then you begin to see there's a pattern: If you start with certain X's or O's in certain boxes, you're sure to lose. When you see the patterns clearly, you lose your fascination with the game. There's no need to play it any more. That's dispassion.

Dispassion basically sees that the mind's been playing a game with itself, going for the allure. But when you see that the drawbacks way outweigh the allure, you ask yourself, "Why continue playing that game?" You've outgrown it.

So those are the standards in terms of the goal that we want to accomplish as we test the Dhamma.

Then we look at how our practice has an impact on others. The Buddha says you want to be modest. You don't want to show off whatever attainments you have. You don't go around bragging about your concentration. There's a nice story in the Canon of a novice, Ven. Anuruddha's novice. Anuruddha, you may remember, was the monk with the divine eye. More than anyone else, he could see devas. He could see what's going on in all the different levels of the universe. He was the one who, on the night of Buddha's passing away, was able to keep track of where the Buddha's mind was in the different levels of concentration before he entered total nibbana.

Anuruddha had a novice who could levitate up to the Himalayas, wash Anuruddha's bowl in the pure waters of a lake up there, and then levitate back. The novice's main thought was how to do this without anybody seeing him. That's the kind of attitude you want to have about your practice. You're not showing off.

You also want to practice in such a way that you don't get entangled with others. You're looking for seclusion—physical seclusion first, so that you can gain seclusion in your mind.

And you try to be unburdensome. You don't make big demands that this has to be that way, that has to be this way, in any way that would place an undue burden on others.

So as you're practicing, if you notice that the way you're practicing is getting you entangled or getting you burdensome, you've got to change. You

realize that what you thought was the Dhamma is not the Dhamma. Or your interpretation of it was not right. You've got to go back and look at that again.

Then there are the qualities that you develop inside: contentment, persistence, and what the Buddha calls shedding. Shedding refers to shedding pride, shedding thoughts of wanting to get revenge.

There's another great story in the Canon of a young prince whose parents had been killed by a king. The prince decides he wants to get revenge. So he applies for the job in the elephant stables of the king's palace. In the evening, he plays the flute to soothe the elephants. Well, the sound of the flute music wafts from the elephant stables into the king's quarters. He likes the sound. So he has the young man brought in to play for him. That soothes him. So he tells the young man to stay as part of his own private retinue.

The young prince works to be trusted by the king, and finally gets the king into a position where, if he wanted to, he could kill him. But he decides not to, because his father, before being executed, had said, "Don't look too far. Don't look too close. Animosity is not ended by animosity. It's ended by non-animosity." In other words, the father was basically saying, "Don't try to get revenge." The young prince finally understood what his father's words meant.

The Buddha told this story. Apparently in one of his previous lifetimes, he was the young prince. He told it to the monks who were involved in a controversy over minor, minor things and he said, "Look, here are the noble warriors who live by the sword. They can still practice forgiveness. They can still shed their thoughts of revenge. Why can't you as practitioners?"

Revenge may be too strong a word for the feelings you may have about others. But sometimes you just want to get back at somebody, with a conviction that you're right. But your rightness is creating a lot of trouble. There are ways of being right but being wrong at the same time. So, you want to learn how to shed those.

Then the pair of contentment and persistence: You're content with material things. If the food, clothing, shelter, medicine you have is enough to keep you alive, keep you practicing, okay, then it's enough.

But you're *not* content when unskillful attitudes come in and take over your mind. You don't just leave them there, saying, "Well that's just the way causes and conditions are. I've got to learn how to accept that. I shouldn't try to figure things out. I shouldn't try to pass judgment on these things. I should just learn how to accept them." That's stupidity. These things that come rising up in the mind influence your actions. If you have any sense of compunction, you realize, as the Buddha says, that you've got to wipe them out of existence.

Remember his statement that one of the secrets to his awakening was that he did *not* rest content even with skillful qualities. In other words, if they weren't skillful enough to take him all the way, he kept on looking for what

was more skillful. When he described his path of practice, he said that he was in search of what was skillful. He left home in search of what was skillful. After he studied with the two ajaans and was disappointed in their teachings, he went out alone in search of what is skillful. When his austerities didn't work, he went in search of what was skillful. When he finally got the mind in right concentration, and wanted to know what was the skillful use of this concentration, he used it to gain the three knowledges. In each case, he tried to ask himself, once he gained knowledge, "What's the skillful use of that knowledge?"

In terms of the first two knowledges, there were people who had attained those before him. There were people who had seen their previous lifetimes and then set themselves up as teachers. But the Buddha realized that that was not the skillful use of that knowledge. It had to be pursued further. Seeing that the way you were been reborn, or the way he had been reborn, went up and down, up and down, up and down, the question was, "Why? How?"

He had a vision of all beings in the cosmos dying and being reborn in line with their actions. Again, there were people who had similar knowledge and set themselves up as teachers. But the Buddha realized that that was not the skillful use of that knowledge. The skillful use was to figure out: How do you end the suffering that comes from this endless round? He focused in on his own intentions. He focused in on his own views there in the present moment. That's how he was finally able to gain awakening.

So he didn't rest content. He kept searching: "Given that I have this, what's the skillful use of it? And if something is not skillful, how do you abandon it?" If your practice is that kind of practice, then the practice is headed in the right direction. You're following the right method—because how do you know what's skillful and what's not skillful? You look at the results. You put this principle into action, and what happens? You put that principle into action, what happens? Are the results satisfactory?

It was his unwillingness to be satisfied easily: That's how he became the Buddha.

So, these are the principles, the ways of measuring your actions to see: Are they really skillful or are they not? Are they Dhamma or are they not? You want to keep these principles in mind. Then, wherever you go, you've got the method to test things.

It's interesting that the Buddha taught these principles to his stepmother. As we see in the Canon, there were very few times when the Buddha himself taught the nuns. Occasionally, when someone was ill, his stepmother would come with a question. But otherwise, he would have the monks go teach the nuns on a regular basis in his stead. So when his stepmother came and asked for a short teaching that would help her in her practice, he gave her the

principles so that she could learn how to depend on herself, to test what is and is not the Dhamma.

So, this is the method. This is how the Dhamma gets tested. And this is what guarantees the Dhamma. Because, as I said, you can read the books, you can think things through, and it can all make sense, but if you don't actually put things into practice, you don't really know. And if you don't put them into practice, you don't understand the subtleties of some of the concepts.

We had an old man come and stay with us for several years at Wat Dhammasathit. When he was younger, he had been ordained as a monk, studied and passed the seventh grade of Pali exams, which is pretty advanced. Then he disrobed, got a job with the government, and when he retired, he came out to live at the monastery. He was constantly contemplating the meaning of different Pali phrases. He still kept his interest in Pali going. Ajaan Fuang made an interesting comment one time. He said that this man's understanding of the Dhamma was really coarse. Here was someone who passed all those exams, had lots of knowledge about the language, but that was it. It was in words. If you want subtle knowledge of the Dhamma, you've got to practice. You've got to be very observant and use your ingenuity. You've got to use your ingenuity when there are things that you think you understand, but when you put them into practice, they don't work. You've got to figure out why.

So you're not just here obeying instructions. You've got to put some of yourself into this. Just like scientists: They have to put some of themselves into designing their experiments right, using their ingenuity to figure out how to go about detecting a certain relationship. The more you put into it, the more you're going to get out.