

Here to Learn

November 13, 2022

We're all sitting in the same room, but each of us is in a different world—what the Buddha calls becoming. The room here is our becoming on a human plane. We all have a share in that, but our perspective on that plane is something very individual. We've each taken on a role as a being in this realm, and we see the world through our own eyes and not through anybody else's. We feel it through our own body, and not through anybody else's.

Now, it's true that we have certain patterns in common. Otherwise there would be no point in talking, no point in sharing knowledge. This is why the Buddha said that these four noble truths are noble: They're universal; they apply to everybody. The structure of the way in which each of us creates suffering is the same.

Now, some of the details will be different, but the main structure in terms of the fact that the suffering is in the clinging; that the clinging comes from craving, the kind of craving that leads to more becoming; and that craving can be ended by following the path: That's a pattern we all have in common, and that's where we can learn how to be right.

We don't start out right. We start out with our ignorance, and we're learning about the four noble truths and the duties that are appropriate to them. But we're not going to really know them until we've completed the duties.

In the meantime, we'll gain a sense of what's right and what's wrong, but even for those who gain the Dhamma eye—in other words, those who gain stream-entry—there are still certain things they don't understand about the duties. They've got the basic framework down. They have an idea of what's on course and what's off course, but the details that will take them all the way: Those are things they still have to learn. And those are noble disciples, so for those of us who are not noble disciples, we have to accept the fact that we're still learning about what's right.

Luang Phaw Phut—who was one of Ajaan Sao's few students—tells of a time

when he was a novice attending to Ajaan Sao. People would come and ask to learn how to meditate, and he'd tell them to repeat "Buddho." They would ask him, "What does 'Buddho' mean?" He'd say, "Don't ask, just do it." "And what's going to happen when I do it?" "Don't ask, just do it."

So some of them would go and do it, and they'd come back and report the results. If the results were definitely wrong, he'd say, "Okay, you're doing this wrong. You've got to change the way you're doing it," and he'd give them advice. If they were doing it right, they'd ask, "Is this right?" And he'd say, "Whether it's right or not, just keep on doing it." Because it's really right only when the mind really settles down.

And if you're talking about ultimate right, it's really right only when you take it all the way to awakening. So you're on the way to what's right, and you have to accept that fact and learn how to compensate for it. This is why we have to keep checking our knowledge again and again. And this is just dealing with things inside ourselves. Dealing with people outside is even more complicated.

You have five aggregates. Each other person has his or her five aggregates. And when we get into contact with another, it's not like adding our five aggregates with their five aggregates, it's like multiplying them or taking five to the fifth power—a lot of complications. So you have to realize when you're dealing with other people, the same issues that apply inside are going to apply outside—even more so.

You're coming from wrong and you're trying to learn what's right, so there are bound to be mistakes. You have to learn how to live with the mistakes, and learn from them. This is why the Buddha gave that lesson to Rāhula at the very beginning.

It wasn't about how to do things right all the time. It was basically instructions in how to try to do things as best you can, always trying to work on good intentions. If you have any intentions that you know are unskillful, don't follow them. If they seem skillful, go ahead. But you're going to find out sometimes that a skillful intention leads you to do something that's not skillful. Or what *seems* to be a skillful intention... let's put it this way, it's a good intention, but it can lead to bad results.

Which means you have to go back and look at the intention and look at what you did, and see how best you can learn from it. This is easiest to do when you act on what you think are good intentions. If you act on an intention you know is bad, and you come out with bad results, you tend to hide it from yourself. So that's the first lesson: Try to act on best intentions, but realize that there are still things to learn.

If you have that attitude—you're here to learn—then you're approaching the meditation with the right attitude. On the days when the meditation goes well, notice that. After the meditation is over, try to reflect back: Where were you focused? What was the breath like? If there seems to be a point where things were especially solid and clear inside, what were the steps leading up to that? Can you remember? If you're mindful enough, you should have some memory. Try to apply that the next time around.

Now, the next time around it may not work, which means you have to realize the mind has its moods, it has its rhythms, and what worked yesterday may not work today. Or it may be the fact that you didn't observe things carefully the first time around. You made a mistake. Learn how to be cheerful about your mistakes. In other words, admit that they're mistakes and be serious about not following through. But just accept the fact that you can be wrong.

So many times people ask, "How can I guarantee that I don't do anything wrong?" Well, there's no guarantee ahead of time. The best thing is to develop the attitude *I'm here to learn*. If things don't go well in the meditation, again, you're here to learn. Why are they not going well? Is it the breath? Is it what's going on in the mind? Is it the state of mind you're bringing to the meditation? And what are the things that you can manipulate and change to see if you can get better results? Even if you don't get better results, remind yourself that you learned: That didn't work, this didn't work. Next time around, see what else you can try. And always be alive to the fact that you may be asking the wrong questions.

I'm reading a book now, a history of humanity going back to the earliest stages. The authors are pointing out that many of the questions that anthropologists and archaeologists have been asking all along have been the wrong questions. If you learn to ask new questions, you can look at the data and see things that people

missed because they were funneled into the wrong questions. The questions funneled their attention in the wrong places.

As for the question: “How can I deal with people in way that I don’t hurt their feelings?” Remember we’re here not to harm them, but hurt feelings are not harm. Saying things that hurt people’s feelings is not necessarily wrong speech. The Buddha said, there’s a time and place for speech that’s unpleasant as long as you’re motivated by what you see as true and seems to be beneficial. You’re acting on good intentions, and the next step is to figure out what’s the right time to say things that are pleasing, and what’s the right time and way to say things that are displeasing—realizing that being displeasing is not automatically harm.

You’re going to learn, and you’re going to learn that you make mistakes sometimes. If you want to be the kind of person who doesn’t make mistakes at all, you have to go hide out some place alone and not contact people at all. When dealing with people, there’ll always be errors. Even arahants can make mistakes in their dealings with other people.

There’s that biography that Ajaan Mahā Boowa wrote about Ajaan Mun. As he was preparing it, he happened to meet up with one of Ajaan Mun’s students who had had a lot of psychic issues coming up in his meditation. When that student had brought his problems to Ajaan Mun, Ajaan Mun would tell him about the problems he had had of that sort.

Now, these were things Ajaan Mun ordinarily would not talk about. As he had told Ajaan Fuang, when things like this happen in your meditation, you tell only one person, i.e., the teacher. It’s no one else’s business. Apparently, Ajaan Fuang had been checking out the devas in the nearby hills, and had mentioned something about this to some of the other monks. So Ajaan Mun reprimanded him quite strongly.

Whereas, when this other monk—years after Ajaan Mun had passed away—was interviewed by Ajaan Mahā Boowa, he told about all the various things he’d learned about Ajaan Mun’s visions of devas here and nagas there and whatnot. So Ajaan Mahā Boowa put that information into the Ajaan Mun biography. Then, when it was printed, there was a huge reaction, a very negative reaction in a lot of circles. And Ajaan Mahā Boowa realized that those were things he shouldn’t have

put in the book.

So, in dealing with other people, it's possible to have purest mind and you can still make mistakes, but if you have the right attitude, you learn from them. Of course, a pure mind will learn from them. Our minds are not fully pure yet, but if you have the attitude, "I'm here to learn," that will see you through a lot of things.

As I said, a lot of learning is learning that you've been asking the wrong questions. Or you may have picked up a view that's not quite right. When you're dealing with your own issues inside, the gold standard, of course, is the four noble truths and the duties appropriate to them.

When you're dealing with people outside, you have to remember what counts as harm and what doesn't count as harm. If you induce people to have greed, aversion, and delusion on purpose, okay, that's harm. If you induce them to break the precepts, that's harm. But if you hurt their feelings, sometimes it's skillful and sometimes it's not. So learn how to make distinctions like this. Learn how to develop the quality that the Buddha calls *patibhāna*. It's a word that's hard to translate. It can be translated as ingenuity, your inner resourcefulness, your ability to think outside the box.

So, when you run into an issue with other people, ask yourself, "Okay, what other ways could I look at this? How could I handle the situation, at the very least not causing harm, and at the best maintaining harmony, maintaining a sense of community, maintaining the ability to work together for a positive purpose?"—knowing that there are some situations where you have to develop equanimity. You start out with goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy, but there will be cases where you have to develop equanimity as well. You don't go straight to the equanimity. You maintain the goodwill, but there are times when you have to fall back on equanimity for your own peace of mind.

So, you're here to learn, and if you can maintain that attitude, it helps you deal skillfully with a lot of mistakes, so you can learn the lessons that they have to teach.

And as I say, approach this with certain amount of cheerfulness—happy that you can learn, happy that your mind is not so set in its ways that it's closed to learning things new. If you can maintain that attitude, it'll see you through a lot of

problems and help keep you on course.