

Ready to Evacuate

August 31, 2016

Every year, as the fire season approaches, we have to sort through our things, just in case there's a forced evacuation. What do we have to take? I get a bag and put some old photos and old documents and other things that can't be reproduced, and anything that I think that's really necessary to keep: I put all that in a bag, and it's right next to the door. If an evacuation order comes, I pick it up and it's easy to go—a lot easier than if I waited until the fire appeared to sort through which things are worth taking.

The same principle applies to all of us. Aging, illness, and death come. And especially when death comes, it's like an evacuation order. You've got to go. And if you haven't had any practice in putting things down and deciding what's not necessary to take with you, you find yourself trying to clutch at all kinds of random things, many of which will slip through your fingers. What often happens is that you grab at the wrong things, while the things that really are good to take get left behind. This is why we practice: so that we can sort through what's really of value in our minds and what's not.

As you sit and meditate, getting into concentration, you have to put a lot of things aside, even though it's just for the time being. But it's good practice, because you learn an important principle: that the mind is not made wealthy by holding on to lots of things. It actually puts itself in better shape by letting go. There's a greater sense of wholeness in the mind. In other words, the mind increases its own value the less it holds on to other things.

Of course, when we're practicing concentration we don't totally let go. We focus on what we're doing right now and hold on there. And that's an important point. Ajaan Suwat liked to emphasize this a lot. The Buddha says that so many things are not-self, not-self, not-self, but your actions are your own. Or as the passage from the Canon says, "We're the owners of our actions." Those are the things you want to hold on to—your actions—in the sense that you want to hold on to your ability to do skillful things, to make skillful choices.

So right now the skillful choice is to stay in the present moment. Stay with the object of your meditation. Learn to develop a sense of ease around it, a sense of well-being around it—both so that it's a good place to stay and so that you get a greater sense of the worth of the mind on its own. What it can do is a lot more important than what it can hold on to or try to lay claim to. Because actions are an interesting kind of possession: You do them and you don't have to hold on to

them. Even after the action is done, its results are going to be there. You don't have to carry them around. So you just keep focusing on holding on to the mindfulness that reminds you to act skillfully and the conviction that this really does make a difference.

The Buddha talks about the different strengths of the mind. The number-one strength is discernment, this ability to let go of things that are not necessary. It makes it a lot easier to go around if you're not loaded down like the old grandmother in the Thai folk tale. They tell of an old grandmother who carries a big load of straw. Everywhere she goes, she's got a big load of straw on her back. People ask her, "Grandma, why are you carrying this big load of straw?" And she says, "I may need it someday." And it turns out she never gets to use it. It's there just in case, but she's loaded down—and with a big load of straw on her back, she can't pick up other things of value.

So we each have to go sort our lives and see what loads of straw we're carrying around. Some of them are things that we really hold dear: our relationships to our family, our relationship with our friends, our old memories of good times. When the time comes to go, though, you have to let these things go. As for whatever karma you have with your family and friends, how to get you back together again, you don't have to hold on to that. But as for the memories of the good times you had, those are very painful memories at that point. Those are things you really want to put down. So you learn how to put them down right now.

This is why discernment on its own is not enough. The four qualities that go with discernment, that support it, are conviction, persistence, mindfulness, and concentration.

Conviction here is the conviction that your actions really do matter and that you do have the ability to take this principle of action, which explains why we suffer, and you can learn how to master it so that you don't have to suffer. Even though you may have done unskillful things in the past, you can still figure out how you don't have to suffer from them.

Persistence is sticking with the conviction that you've got to act skillfully right now. Regardless of what you've done in the past, you can act skillfully now. And you realize the law of karma is not like those parking laws they have in a city, where on this side of street, on this day of the week, you can park, but on other days of the week, you can't park. The law of karma is 24/7, so you've got to be persistent 24/7.

Mindfulness is what reminds you what's important and what's not important, what's skillful and what's not.

And then getting your mind into concentration is actual practice in doing this,

letting go of everything that's not relevant to the breath right now, and seeing how well you can stick with that determination.

These are the four qualities that support your strength of discernment—the discernment that realizes that wealth doesn't lie in having lots of things or lots of different minds. Usually, the mind is divided up into lots of different things. There's this part of the mind holding on to this, and that part of the mind holding onto that. When the mind gets divided up like this, though, each part gets weaker and weaker and weaker. It's when the mind is whole that it's strong.

It's like fruit in a market. In Thailand, the most prized fruit is durian. There's a part of the year when the durian is extremely expensive because there are very few in the market. But when there's lots of durian in the market, it gets thrown away, even to the dogs. The same with the mind: When it's One, it's like having one durian in the entire market. It's going to command a high price. The mind has a lot of value when it's One. There's a sense of well-being that it can't have when it's divided up into a lot of little things. You want to appreciate the value of that Oneness. That's a large part of discernment.

You can't really divide right view from right concentration. It's possible to read the texts and learn about what the Buddha said about how this is not-self and that's not-self, and then decide that you agree. But when the time actually comes and you find yourself holding on to these things that you agreed were not-self, you have to ask yourself: Why? It's because your concentration wasn't strong enough and you didn't have the practice in letting go and you didn't have the appreciation for what it's like to have a mind that is truly *One*.

So work on your strength of discernment because that's what's going to carry you through. And work on these other four qualities—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, and concentration—because they help take what's true in theory and make it actually true in practice.