

Looking Inward

March, 2002

Ajaan Lee once said, “The path of the Dhamma is looking inside.” When you look outside, it’s *the world*. The mind that’s concerned with things outside, that’s part of the world as well. It’s when you look inside—that’s when there’s Dhamma.

So this is where our practice focuses. Notice where the path lies: It lies in our thoughts, our words, our deeds. Generosity may be an act of giving things to other people, but it’s primarily a development of a quality of the mind. The same with the precepts: They govern our interactions with other people, but their primary purpose is training our thoughts, words, and our deeds—again, focusing in on our mind: the intentions that underlie our actions.

At the same time, we develop qualities of mindfulness and alertness as we maintain our precepts. And, of course, meditation is a matter of directly looking in at your own mind. Other things may come up—thoughts about this person, that person, this thing, that thing, this should be that way, that should be this way—but that’s not the Dhamma, that’s *the world*. You’ve got to put those things aside because there’s a lot of unfinished business inside. This is why we have to look right here.

We know that someday we’re going to have to face aging, illness, and death, as the chant just said now. We’re going to have to face separation. All of these things are painful, and yet they’re a normal part of life. That chant we had—“Aging is unavoidable, we’re subject to aging, illness, and death”—the Thai translation says, “Aging is *normal*, illness is *normal*, death is *normal*.” And we have to ask ourselves often, again, and again: “Are you ready for these things when they happen? Are you prepared?” And the answer is almost always “No.”

But we spend our time worrying about this or that, creating this issue, creating that issue, as if we didn’t already have enough issues. The mind is a constant creator of issues—if it’s not trained.

Then when the time comes, we realize that the big issues in our life have been neglected, and we realize how much time we’ve wasted. When the Buddha talks about being uncomplacent, when he talks about being heedful, this is what he’s talking about. There’s a lot of unfinished business in our own minds that’s got to be taken care of, and yet we drop it and go off and get ourselves involved in other things—playing around as if we had all the time in the world.

People who are wise turn around and look inside, realizing that this is where the important work lies, right inside here. It’s not simply an issue of doing a little internal work so that you’re okay, and then going out and playing around some more. It’s not just a matter of coping. You want to get to the point where you don’t have to cope, where you can work through these issues until they’re totally resolved. The Buddha said that it’s possible.

Many of us don't think it's possible, which is why we don't get the most benefit out of our meditation. The Buddha says you can put an end to aging and death if you really look carefully inside, because the seeds of these things lie in our minds, in our hearts, and they can be taken out so there's an end to all this suffering. So make sure that your gaze is focused inside all the time. This is the main work we have here—*looking inward*.

As for outside things: Because we have a body, we have to live in the world, so we take care of our requisites. We live with other people, so we have to take notice of other people, but what do we take notice of? Look at their good habits, look at their bad habits, for what purpose?

Well, see what they reflect about ourselves. When you see someone else doing something careless, something thoughtless, something irresponsible, ask yourself, "Do I act that way? Am I careless, am I thoughtless, am I irresponsible in my actions?" You see the harm that's done when other people act in that way; you have to look back and see what kind of harm you're doing when you act in that way as well.

As for their good qualities, look at those again—as a mirror for yourself. "Do I have those good qualities in myself yet?" If not, "What can these people teach me? What can I learn from them, so that I can master their skills as well?"

But again, when you look outside, it's meant to be as a mirror to reflect back in, to see what's going on in your mind. When you look at your own actions, reflect back in to the intention that lies behind them. This is one area that we really don't like to look at because many times our intentions are mixed.

And this is where our largest sphere of ignorance lies. We often think of ignorance simply as a lack of knowing, but many times it's an *active* ignoring—an *active* covering up. The mind hides things from itself, and then it doesn't want to look at the fact that it's hidden things.

This is why we have such trouble looking inside. Almost every time we look inside, we bounce back out: You're angry at this person, you're angry at that person. You want to tell this person what to do, you want to tell that person what to do. Why? Because you don't want to look at what you're doing while you're doing it.

One of the reasons why we develop concentration is to create a sense of well-being in the mind so that it'll start admitting the places where it's been lying to itself. The analogy is with someone who's hungry: If you try to talk to a hungry or tired person about what's wrong with them, they don't want to listen. But if you wait to talk when they're rested, well fed, they're much more likely to listen. It's the same with your own mind: If you want to look into the mind, you have to create a sense of well-being first before you can start taking things apart, and pointing this out and that out, and admitting to yourself the things that you've been going for so long *not* admitting.

This is why we work on creating this sense of well-being, staying with the breath—learning how to keep the mind in a basic good mood. Not because the good mood is an end in and of itself: You use it as a tool.

So often we treat pleasure and pain as ends in themselves, especially the pleasure as an end in and of itself. We get a pleasant feeling and okay, that's it. We just want to hold on to that pleasure. The Buddha's discovery was that you can take pleasure and pain and *use them* as tools. The pleasure is used to create the sense of well-being in the mind, the sense of stability, so that it can really start looking inward in a way that's steady, in a way that's calm, dispassionate, and doesn't let itself get waylaid by the tricks of the mind.

You use pain as a tool as well. One thing you're going to find as you look inside in the present moment is both physical and mental pain. There are lots of lessons to be learned from them. Again, these are things we tend to avoid, things we tend to run from. But we have to turn around and look directly at them so that we can learn the lessons they have to offer.

Because there's not just the pain, there are lots of other things clustered around the pain: all those mental acts, all those subconscious decisions we make as soon as the pain arises. If you're patient and still enough, you can begin to see them and take them apart to see further, "Oh, this is what the mind does. This is how the mind creates unnecessary suffering for itself." When you really see and understand, then you let it go. You're freed from those habits.

So we learn to take pleasure and pain as our tools, using them to create the proper frame of mind for looking inside so that the mind can really understand itself. We give our inner gaze the proper focus. Because until this particular issue is taken care of, it's just going to linger in there and keep coming back at you again and again and again. No matter how much you try to deny it, no matter how much you try to run away from it, it's always going to be there. And there will come times when you can't run away.

You want to have your tools ready, you want to have your skills ready, so that when the really big pains come in life, the big sufferings come in life, you've got the tools you need to handle them. Then, when you can handle them properly, you'll realize: The time spent looking inward like this is very well spent. It's the most valuable part of your life.

The time spent looking outside, creating all kinds of outside issues, is just a burden, a distraction. It's just an unnecessary creation of a lot of confusion, a lot of suffering both for yourself and for people around you. So you have to ask yourself, are you going to spend your time burdening yourself more and more, or are you going to spend your time learning to lessen the burdens, lighten the loads? Watch out for that habit of the mind to carry things around and create issues where they really don't have to exist.

The Buddha talks about *papañca*: the mind's ability to complicate things. That's one of our main problems in the practice. And this Dhamma, he said, is for people who delight in non-complication. Instead of creating issues, they want to resolve the issues; instead of getting

entangled, they want to get disentangled; instead of carrying on the battles that people carry on among themselves, they want to bring them to an end.

You realize that those battles lead nowhere. They just create unnecessary burdens, unnecessary stress and suffering. The habit that wants to get out of those battles, get out of those complications: That, the Buddha said, is the mark of a great person, the mark of someone who's really ready for the Dhamma. The Dhamma is for a person like that, he said.

So we get the mind to settle down, give it this sense of well-being, and try to create the habits that we need, so that we really are ready to benefit from the Dhamma, ready to take it inside. One of the traditional meanings of the word *opanayiko* that we chant day in, day out, is that the Dhamma is meant to be *taken in*. It's meant to be applied inside the mind, and not just worn as a surface effect. It's something that really does dig deep in and make basic changes in the way we manage our minds, the way we relate to ourselves and relate to others, so that there's less and less harm going on.

So. The big problems lie in here. The Buddha gives us the tools for dealing with them. We're fortunate we have this opportunity to practice. It's not everybody who gets to spend whole days just looking at their own minds. So take the opportunity while you have it, and make the most of it.