

Gaining the Dhamma Eye

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The Buddha once divided the world into two types of beings: those who are certain and those who are uncertain—“certain” in the sense that their future course is secure. They’re sure to reach nibbāna. Whatever rebirth they may still need to experience before then will be no lower than the human. These are the people who’ve seen the deathless through what they call “gaining the Dhamma eye.” Everyone else, the Buddha said, is uncertain. And being uncertain like this is not a good place to be. There’s no guarantee of how long it will take you to reach nibbāna, or where you’ll be reborn in the meantime.

So our practice should be aimed at becoming certain in this way, gaining the Dhamma eye, seeing the deathless. The purpose of the four noble truths is to focus us in that direction, to get us there. But more is required than just knowing the four noble truths. The Buddha said there are four qualities that help get you to that first taste of awakening.

The first is associating with good people, admirable people, because the people we associate with really do have an impact on our lives. The Buddha once said that it’s like being a wrapper either to an old rotten fish or to a piece of very fragrant wood. If the leaf gets wrapped around a rotten fish, the leaf begins to smell bad as well. If it’s wrapped around fragrant wood, like aloe wood or sandalwood, the leaf becomes fragrant, too. We pick up habits from the people we associate with. This is why it’s important to find somebody that you really trust, someone whose behavior is inspiring, who you can trust not to make false claims of knowledge on the basis of greed, aversion, or delusion; and someone who can show you the path—because they suggest to you what’s possible in human life.

This is why the Buddha once said that without him as our admirable friend, we’d be pretty much lost, because he was the person who showed what a human being can do, to gain the Dhamma eye and go beyond the Dhamma eye to full awakening, to the complete end of suffering.

We hear about this and it sounds inspiring. When you’ve attained the Dhamma eye, you see that it’s actually true: Even with our human imperfections, we can learn how to overcome those imperfections. At the very least, we can see our mind in action, see where it’s causing stress and suffering, and learn to stop whatever actions are causing stress and suffering. In the course of doing that, we can gain the Dhamma eye.

So that's the first requisite: associating with people who let you know that this is possible. It's not just hearsay, not just a myth or a nice archetype that can't really be lived up to. It's something that really can be discovered. It can be lived. And it really helps to hang around people who've seen that, because it gives you a new idea of what you can do with your own life. That's the first requisite.

The next requisite is listening to the true Dhamma from that person. The Buddha gives examples on how you can know what's true Dhamma: if it leads to dispassion, if it leads to being easy to look after, if it leads to being disentangled, if it leads to freeing yourself from the fetters of the mind. In other words, you know the true Dhamma by the kind of behavior it inspires in you. If you put this into practice, these are the kinds of results you should expect: That's how you recognize the true Dhamma.

Once you've listened to it, then the Buddha says, you apply appropriate attention. That's the third quality. In other words, you take the Dhamma you've listened to and ask yourself how you should put it into practice to see exactly where you're still causing stress and suffering, where you are not. This is where the teachings in the four noble truths come in. These are the categories you use to look at your experience.

Basically, these truths come down to cause and effect. And it's important to have a proper understanding of cause and effect. The Buddha's teachings on cause and effect are not deterministic. Every moment, he says, is composed of results of past actions or past intentions, your current actions or intentions, and then the results of your current actions and intentions. So some things are shaped by the past. You can't go back and change your past actions, but at the same time, they don't determine everything. There's also this element of present intention, and there's a possibility of freedom right there. We do have choices.

While we're sitting here meditating, you can begin to see this in your breath. You can choose what way to breathe. Now, you may not be taking full advantage of that freedom, but the freedom is there. A lot of the meditation is learning how to take more and more advantage of this freedom, even on this very basic level. You can choose long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, deep, shallow, all kinds of breathing. Learn to look at your breathing as a process of either skillful or unskillful cause, and then look at the effects, which feelings arise as a result of the way you breathe. This is an immediate lesson in the four noble truths and the categories of appropriate attention.

From there you can apply the same lesson to other aspects of your life, such as your sense of who you are. Often we feel that we're stuck with a certain personality, certain traits, certain habits, and that this is just inherent in what we

are as people. But the Buddha says never to define yourself as to what you are. Just look at your sense of self and realize that it, too, is an activity. You keep creating a sense of self over and over and over again, and you do it in different ways. The self you create around feelings of physical hunger is very different from the self you create around the desire to sit here and meditate.

If you look at your sense of self over time, you see how often it changes. It's like the reflections of light on water, slipping all around, all over the place, very slithering and fast. And because these selves are activities, you can learn how to do them more skillfully. You can apply appropriate attention to the way you create a sense of self. Look at the way you create a self around this, that, the other thing, and notice what happens as a result. To what extent does that particular sense of self cause suffering and stress, and to what extent does it help alleviate suffering and stress? Once you see it as an activity, then you realize you can change. If you're stuck with your self as a thing that's already defined, you're really up the creek, because how is your self going to change itself? It's got to be stuck with the way it is.

Some people actually use this argument to say that it's impossible for anyone to overcome their own defilements. They have to hope for help from outside, because the self is so inherently corrupt that it can't purify itself. But that's looking at the self is a unitary thing. Again, the Buddha never says to do that. He says to look at your sense of self as an activity. You can always change your actions. From the point of view of one sense of self, you can look at your other self-activities, to see which ones are skillful and which ones are not. After all, all your senses of self are based on the desire for pleasure, on the desire to overcome pain. How we mature, how we gain experience in the world, lies in seeing which of our actions really are effective in giving rise to pleasure and which ones are not.

So, because we have these multiple selves, we can use them to train one another, to observe one another, to get more and more sensitive to the results of these self-actions.

This is applying appropriate attention to this whole issue of self in such way that makes you realize you can change. There are skillful ways of selfing and unskillful ways, so you learn how to be more and more skillful in applying the four noble truths to the activity of selfing, realizing that there are some areas that you can change in terms of what you're intending to do right now. As for the raw materials you've got, often they come from past actions, and you can't change that. But there's always the opportunity to do the most skillful thing with the raw materials you've got. You look at all the people in the past who have come from varying backgrounds, or backgrounds with a lot of negative karma, and yet were

able to gain awakening. Angulimala is the primary example, but we've also got lots of examples in the Theragatha and Therigatha: people whose meditation was miserable for years and years and years. They thought they just didn't have it in them. A couple of them actually contemplated suicide. But then they gained insight into exactly how they were causing suffering, and how they didn't have to do.

So no matter how bad their past karma was, they were able to attain awakening because of that potential for freedom in the present moment, the freedom to do what whatever is skillful right now, regardless of what raw material your past karma gives you. That's the freedom we always have. Appropriate attention focuses you on that potential for freedom. It teaches you what to do to make the most of it.

The fourth quality is practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. This means several things. On the one hand, you don't practice in line with your preferences. You see what the Dhamma requires and you do it. All too often, we practice the Dhamma in accordance with our preferences, and all that does is to keep us stuck in our old ways. If you really want to see something new in life, you have to turn things around. You have to adjust your preferences to fit in with the Dhamma.

When the Buddha recommends virtue, okay, we try virtue. We fit all of our actions and attitudes in line with the requirements for virtue. The precepts are promises we make to ourselves. They're universal promises. In other words, under no circumstances will we kill. Under no circumstances will we steal and so on, down through the main precepts. In whichever areas you find that the precepts are difficult, you learn to work with that, to see how you can change your habits so that you can maintain that promise to yourself. As the Buddha said, when you make that promise to yourself and stick with it, you're providing universal peace, safety, and security for the whole world. And then you have a portion of that universal security as well.

In other words, under no circumstances will you kill. The result of that is you're not creating the circumstances by which anybody would come back and kill you. As for the past karma with which you may have killed people, animals, or whatever in the past, you deal with that in terms of developing good qualities of mind right now. As the Buddha said, if you develop immeasurable goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, the results of past bad karma will be minimized, because of the large and abundant quality of your mind.

So this is what the Dhamma requires. Practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. You tell yourself, "I'm going to put my preferences aside and

really shape my life, really shape my actions in line with what the Buddha taught.” After all, his teachings were teachings that came from his awakening. They didn’t come from his just sitting around thinking about what would be nice. He had seen in his own practice what worked, what didn’t work. And he taught everything in a very straightforward manner. So we owe it to ourselves to give the teachings on virtue a try.

The same with the practice of concentration, the practice of discernment: We try to bring our minds in line with the instructions to see what happens. In other words, you really put the Buddha’s teachings to the test. That’s one meaning of practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma.

The other meaning is that you practice for the sake of disenchantment, dispassion. In other words, you keep your mind focused on that goal: that you’re going to try to get beyond all of your attachments to your emotions, all your attachments to everything that colors the mind, that obscures the mind. You’re going to focus on the purity of your own mind as your main goal, because that’s ultimately what dispassion means. You’re not going to let your mind get clouded by its old desires, its old fears, its old aversions.

You’re trying to develop a state of mind in which the mind can be in the world but not colored by the world. It can maintain its purity no matter what its surroundings are. You look at all the things of the mind likes to feed on and you learn to train it so that it’s strong enough—through virtue, concentration, and discernment—that it doesn’t have to feed on those things anymore. You lift your mind. This is what the heightened mind needs. You lift your mind above your old likes and dislikes, the things it used to feed on, and you get to the point where you realize you don’t want to feed on those things anymore. You become disenchanted with them. From disenchantment comes dispassion, and from dispassion comes release.

So these are the four qualities we should keep in mind as we’re practicing, because these are the things that lead to our experience of the deathless.

We make our actions more and more refined through virtue, concentration, and discernment, learning to see the results of our actions: where they’re causing stress, where we can act in ways that are more skillful that cause less stress. As you cause less stress, your sensitivity gets more and more refined. You keep working at this until you finally get to the point where the mind has no more need for intention. It doesn’t even need to feed off intentions anymore. It can just drop that whole aspect of activity. In other words, you’re so free that you don’t even have to intend.

That's how applying appropriate attention to your actions can lead to the opening of the mind, to the point of the practice called non-fashioning. That's when you realize what the Buddha taught that it was true. There is a deathless. And it can be found through your own efforts.

Notice in these four qualities, nothing says you have to be ordained, that you have to be a monk or nun. It's the quality of your intention, the extent which you devote yourself to the practice: That's what makes the difference.

As Ajaan Mun used to say, the most important thing in the practice is to have the determination that you're not going to come back and create suffering again. You hold on to that no matter what happens, until you finally get to the point you've achieved the goal. That's when you can let go. In the meantime, the path is something you want to hold on to. It's that determination that will see you through. That has nothing to do with the externals of being a lay person, a monk, or whatever. It comes from having seen that you've suffered enough. And you realize that the cause is not outside. It's inside.

When the Buddha offers the potential, that it is possible to train yourself so that you don't have to suffer anymore, you go for it. You do whatever needs to be done. You make whatever sacrifices are required to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma so that you actually do see the Dhamma. If you practice the Dhamma in accordance with your preferences, that's what you end up seeing: your preferences or the results of your preferences. Often they're things you really shouldn't prefer, or you really don't want to prefer, because they lead to suffering. But if you practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, that's when you get the Dhamma eye.

So see if you can prove what the Buddha said was true. And regardless of your past actions, there is this element of freedom in the present moment, the freedom to choose the skillful thing to do. As you explore that freedom, it leads to even greater freedom when you become totally free from all suffering.

At the moment, we have the Buddha as our friend. That's the first element. The question for us now is: Are we going to associate with the Buddha, listen to his Dhamma, apply appropriate attention to our lives, and practice in accordance with his Dhamma? Or not? That's the choice we have to make.