

A Questioning Attitude

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A person who had read a lot of Dhamma books once came to see Ajaan Fuang and told him about her practice. She kept watch on her mind, she said, and any time a defilement appeared, she would uproot it. Ajaan Fuang told her, “Watch out, sometimes while you’re uprooting it, it bears fruit and drops a seed, and grows into another defilement.” What he meant was that sometimes we get so absorbed in a particular technique or a particular approach that we don’t notice the defilements that are growing up around that approach. This is particularly true if we think that we’ve found a technique that’s going to guarantee discernment.

For example, the idea that simply by developing mindfulness, being perfectly equanimous, noting whatever comes up, is automatically going to guarantee discernment: You can get very good at maintaining a state of equanimity, and of course you can really get attached to that equanimity to the point where you get people nowadays saying that equanimity is nibbana. For some reason this issue has come up quite a lot in the past two months. There was even a Dhamma teacher who went over to Burma a couple months back, took along his latest Dhamma book, and went to see a psychic. He wanted the psychic to hold his book to see what message she could get from it. And she told him, “You’re confusing nibbāna with equanimity.”

As the Buddha points out, you can be thoroughly attached to equanimity and it’s still a form of clinging, still a form of attachment, a form of suffering—very subtle, but it’s there. But if you spend your time just noting everything else, you’re going to miss it.

Or looking at things in terms of the three characteristics: I was reading a book a while back saying that other perceptions come under the five aggregates of clinging, and therefore are a form of suffering. But for some reason the author was saying that the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self don’t count as a form of suffering. Therefore, you can’t really cling to them, so you don’t have to let them go. But again, the Buddha pointed out that you can develop these perceptions, and they’ll lead you to a very subtle state of concentration. If no further discernment arises, there you are: You’re stuck on that concentration.

Or the idea that simply doing jhana will guarantee discernment, will guarantee awakening: There are lots of cases of people who stayed in strong states of concentration and then become Brahmas. Then they fell from that state. And as

we've seen in the jhana wars, people can get very, very attached and very, very proud of their jhana attainments. The Buddha talks about what he calls a person of no integrity who takes his jhana attainment—these attainments can go all the way up to the state of neither perception nor non-perception—and use that as a basis for exalting himself and disparaging others. Other people don't quite have his level of attainment, his level of jhana, and it becomes a very strong but subtle level of pride. That pride ruins the jhana and his integrity at the same time.

What all of this shows is that you can't take a technique and hope that it's going to guarantee awakening. What you do with a technique is use it as an opportunity to develop discernment, and the discernment comes from asking questions. You run up against a problem in the meditation and you start questioning things. Hopefully, you start questioning things that you've been taking for granted all along. After all, the insights you're trying to gain are insights about what's happening in the present moment, not about someplace far away that you've never encountered or you've never seen. You've been sitting here in the present moment, aware here in the present moment for who knows how long, yet there are things you overlook.

Often the things you totally take for granted are the things you most need to question. For instance, you may have the idea that if there's pain in the body, it's actually a pain in the body, and it's natural that you're going to suffer. Or if there's a pain in the body, you want to get rid of it. Discernment comes from questioning those ideas—and not in the abstract. As you find yourself taking something for granted, you suddenly realize, "Wait a minute." You have to look at it with the eyes of a stranger and say, "Why would I do that?" The part of the mind that says, "Of course, that's how you do that," is what you've got to question.

Ajaan Fuang talks about how one of the major turning points in his own meditation was when he was suffering from a chronic headache that lasted for weeks and weeks. One night he was sitting with the headache and he suddenly realized, "Wait a minute, I've been trying to make the headache go away all this time. That's not the duty." As we chanted just now in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, the duty with regard to suffering is to comprehend it. That means you have to watch it. Let it be there and watch it to see what happens—and to see particularly where it's coming from, what movement of the mind disturbs the pain, makes it worse, takes the physical pain and brings it into the mind.

It's usually a perception. Again it's a perception we tend to take for granted about where the pain is, how it relates to the body, how the body is pained. You have to question that. This is what the various teachings on the aggregates, the

teachings on the elements are for: to give you some framework for questioning them.

Say, in regard to a physical pain, it's in your knee. There are lots of different sensations in your knee. When the pain comes, it seems to get glommed together with all the other sensations that make up your sense of your knee. Then all you can think about is how to push the pain out of the knee. Yet you can't push it out because it's glued there to everything else in the knee.

But suppose you question that perception. Remind yourself that there are those four elements, four physical elements, or physical properties that the Buddha talks about. There's earth, water, wind, and fire. This is why we use these as objects of meditation for times when you're healthy, so that when pain comes up, you can recognize, "Okay, which sensations there are the wind sensations? Which ones are the fire, i.e., the warmth? Which ones are the water, the coolness? Which ones are the solid sensations?" Those are physical sensations. They come under the physical aggregate, the aggregate of form, which is different from the feeling aggregate.

So when you've got those sensations accounted for, what's left? Where is the pain? You see it flitting around. You've unglued it. You see it as something separate.

Then there's also the perception of the pain. You want to learn how to see the feeling of the pain as separate from the perception of pain. See how the perception is something that arises and passes away, arises and passes away, creates a little bridge between the mind and the physical pain and then dissolves, then creates another one. You want to see that. You're not going to see it if you don't question all of this.

So we use the practice of mindfulness, we use the practice of concentration to get the mind into a position where it can start asking these questions. You see this in all the great meditation traditions. There's a really nice passage in Dogen where he talks about what it means to practice "just sitting." A lot of people assume he's saying just that you sit there and don't do anything else. But for him, just sitting is asking questions about the just sitting. "Is your mind sitting in the body? Is your mind in the sitting? Is the body sitting in the mind? Who's doing the sitting? What are your perceptions around the act of sitting?" Even with something as simple as that, you learn how to question it. You learn how to raise doubts about things you've been assuming for who knows how long. You learn how to question them.

So the idea that someone has found a technique that's guaranteed to work, and all you have to do is just put your nose to the grindstone and do the work: That's

really not in the spirit of how the Buddha taught. You look at his life: All the major milestones in his quest for awakening turned on questions. “Why do I look for happiness in things that change?” Of course, everybody looks for happiness in things that change. “But why?” And so on down the line. All the major turning points in his life came with a question.

Sometimes he’d been doing something for six years, like all the physical self-torture he underwent. He stopped and asked himself, “Why am I doing this? It’s not getting the results I want. Is there another way?” There was. There was still another way that he hadn’t tried yet, the practice of concentration. But the concentration in and of itself didn’t do the work. He had to start asking questions again, “Can I use this concentrated mind to learn things?” In particular, the main turning point was when he used his concentration to delve into this issue: Where is there suffering? Why is there suffering? Is it possible to put an end to suffering? How do you do that?

Those kinds of questions, those kinds of doubts are an essential part of discernment. This is why the Buddha said that the mind is purified by discernment. There’s the idea that by doing metta practice you burn away your anger or by doing mindfulness practice or looking at things in terms of the three characteristics, you burn away your old *sankharas*. The Buddha heaped a lot of ridicule on the idea that you could burn away your old karma, burn away your old defilements simply through mindfulness or simply through patience and endurance. He asked, “Do you know how many of them you’ve burned up today? Can you measure them? How many defilements did you burn this afternoon?” You don’t burn them away that way. You see where you’ve been assuming things, the unthinking connections you make, the unthinking assumptions you’ve been making. You learn to think and say: “Why?”

So this is a process we want to develop as we practice. The ultimate stages of insight are going to come when the mind is really, really still. But you find that you’ll be developing your discernment by asking these questions along the way. In other words, there are certain problems that you can take care of even with discernment based on really basic levels of concentration. Then other levels of problems will pop up as your concentration gets deeper and more refined, your awareness gets more refined, and that allows your questions to get more refined.

It goes back and forth like this. In fact, one of the ways of refining your concentration is to figure out, “What am I running up against? What am I still holding on to? Where’s the disturbance in this state of stillness?” You want to learn how to bring an element of questioning into your practice. There are times

when you want to put that aside so that you can just be still or just be mindful. But you have to develop a sense of when it's the right time to question.

There's a story that was circulating around the forest tradition years back about a Western monk who had gone to one of the monasteries and someone had asked him about how far he had gotten in his practice. He said, "I've gotten to the point where I have no more doubts about the Buddha's teaching." Now, in that monastery, that statement is a claim for at least stream-entry. So they reported this to the teacher. The teacher put his hands over his eyes and said, "I have no doubts. I have no doubts about anything I see."

There's the having-no-doubts of somebody who just accepts everything and does the practice as he's told, who doesn't really think about things. And then there's a point of having no doubts when you've explored your doubts, asked questions, and found answers. You have to ask unexpected questions because, after all, the attainment we're trying to get to will be an unexpected attainment. You don't get there by asking ordinary, everyday questions. You question ordinary things but you question them in an extraordinary way. That's when extraordinary insights are going to arise.

So you can't trust simply that mindfulness will do the work or equanimity will do the work or jhana will do all the work. You have to have a lively imagination, a lively questioning attitude, a willingness to look all around you so that you can catch movements of the mind in the corner of your eye, catch yourself doing something you hadn't realized you were doing.

That's what gaining insight in the four noble truths is all about—catching yourself creating stress and suffering where you didn't even realize it was happening. Mindfulness gets you to the point where you can see these things more clearly. Concentration gets the mind still so that very subtle things become apparent. But they're simply the foundation. Discernment, a questioning attitude, is what does the real work.