

Stern Kindness

July 20, 2010

As we focus on the breath, two important qualities are being developed. One is mindfulness. That's the ability to keep something in mind, like reminding yourself to stay with the breath. The other's alertness, watching what's going on. But mindfulness and alertness on their own are not enough. You also have to have the quality of ardency, the motivation that you really want to do this well because this is an important exercise we're involved in right here, training the mind. It's these three qualities working together that enable us to get results.

So it's not just a matter of watching whatever comes up.

The quality of right effort is important, which is what ardency is all about. And it does involve desire. The mindfulness and alertness are important in keeping that desire alive. Because there are times when we have to remind ourselves why we're doing this. It's especially true when the mind feels lazy or more inclined to wander off someplace else or not even meditate at all. That's when you have to keep in mind the dangers of not meditating, and the rewards of meditating. Sometimes the mindfulness can cajole us into meditating, and other times it has to use threats.

The cajoling is when you remind yourself of the good things that come from meditation: a sense of ease, a sense of well-being. If you're new to the meditation, you may not have gotten a sense of ease and well-being yet, but you've heard reports about it. If you have been meditating for a while, you've had some taste of this. So you want to be able to remind yourself: This is a good thing we're doing here. At the very least, the mind is not getting in trouble. It's not causing harm to itself; it's not causing harm to anybody else. That right there is something important.

Otherwise, you find the mind planning things, and even though it may not be harming anybody yet, sometimes its plans will lead you to do something that *will* harm somebody. I had a student one time who said he would get involved in sexual fantasies, and the idea of inflicting them on other people scared him. So the mind can get involved in all kinds of strange scenarios. You've got to remind yourself: Okay, this is dangerous. If you let the mind wander into those scenarios, they become more and more habitual, and it becomes harder and harder not to act on them.

This is where that second function of mindfulness comes in, the threats, saying “Look, watch out! If you don’t train the mind, there’s going to be trouble.” Even if you don’t get involved in doing grossly unskillful things, you’ve still got this problem: this body here subject to aging, illness, and death. What are you going to do about it? How are you going to prepare? Most people prepare by pretending it’s not going to happen, but that’s not preparing at all, that’s denial, which just makes the situation worse. You’ve got to learn how to think about these things, plan for them in an intelligent way, in a way that doesn’t get you depressed, that doesn’t get you disturbed, but actually encourages you to practice, realizing that this is your way out.

The chant we recited just now: “The world is swept away, it does not endure; it offers no shelter, there is no one in charge; the world has nothing of its own; it’s a slave to craving”: Those are useful themes to think about. They come from a sutta where a monk is explaining to a king why he ordained. He came from a good family, he was wealthy, had all kinds of pleasures. And the king was curious: Why would anybody like that want to ordain? Why would anyone like that want to practice? So the monk lists these reasons. The king doesn’t understand.

That’s one of the things you notice a lot in the Pali Canon: that kings are pretty much innocents when it comes to spiritual matters. They’re so wound up in their wealth and their power—and maintaining their wealth and maintaining their power—that they’re total children when it comes to understanding what life is all about. I knew a monk one time in Thailand who had generals and prime ministers coming to him for advice, and he commented about how talking to them and their jealousy of other politicians, their concern about maintaining their power, about who was getting ahead of whom, was like talking to little kids. Totally immature. And these were the people who were running the country.

It’s also noticeable in the Canon that when the Buddha’s talking about the drawbacks of human life, he illustrates it with the problems that kings faced. In other words, they were the people who had the most power, who seemed to have the best position in human society, and even that position didn’t protect them. It actually exposed them to more dangers, both dangers from outside and dangers from inside. There’s one passage when the Buddha talks about how people who are obsessed with maintaining their power end up doing lots of unskillful things—imprisoning other people, working to prevent other people from harming them—and in doing all these unskillful things, they don’t like to have their unskillful things looked into, and they end up not wanting to look into anybody else’s unskillful things either. They don’t want to hear the Dhamma.

So it’s a snowballing effect. The more you harm other people, the more you get

into a world of unreality. But even if you're a relatively moral ruler, you've still got those problems of aging, illness, and death, which correspond to the Buddha's teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self. When the Buddha talks about those three perceptions he wants you to hold, they're not just grabbed out of the air someplace. They relate to the fact that change means aging in the human body. Wherever there's aging, there's going to be the illness, and the stress that comes with the illness, even before you really get old. And then when death comes, you have to let everything go.

That's how the monk, his name is Ven. Ratthapala, explains these things to the king. The king doesn't understand this saying: The world is swept away; it does not endure. Ratthapala asks him, "When you were young, were you strong?" And the king says, "Yes, I was very strong. It was almost like I had the strength of two people." And Ratthapala says, "How about now?" "Oh, no, now I'm eighty years old. Sometimes I want to put my foot in one place, and it goes someplace else."

In other words, no matter how much control you can gain over the body when you're young and strong, it doesn't stay that way. It's not as if it's made a pact with you that it's going to continue being obedient, or it's going to warn you ahead of time if there's going to be trouble down the line. You suddenly find yourself losing this measure of control, that measure of control. Things you used to be able to do, you suddenly find yourself unable to do. You can't say that the body betrayed you, because it never made any promises. We're the ones who place all our expectations on what the body's going to do for us. That's the teaching on inconstancy.

As for the saying, the world offers no shelter, this one Ratthapala illustrates with the question of illness. He asks the king, "Do you have a recurring illness? And the king says, yes, he does. In fact, sometimes it gets so bad that his courtiers just stand around saying, "Now he's going to die, now he's going to die." And Ratthapala says, "Can you order them to share out your pain, so you feel less pain?" And the king says, "No, I've got to face all that pain on my own." No matter how good doctors can get, there comes a point where they just have to throw up their hands, and they can't do any more to prevent pain. Then you're left to face it on your own. That's the teaching on suffering and stress.

And as for the statement, "The world has nothing of its own," the king says, "Look, I have all this money, all these treasures stored away. How can you say the world has nothing of its own?" And Ratthapala replies, "Can you take that with you when you die?" "No, I've got to leave it here. When I die, I'll pass on and leave everything." That's the teaching on not-self.

Yet in spite of all this aging, illness, and death, there's the fact that we're a slave to craving. We just keep wanting more and more and more of these things that we

can't really control, that can't offer us any real protection, and that we're going to have to let go of in the end anyhow.

This is illustrated with a question. "Do you rule over a prosperous nation?" And the king says, "Yes." You'd think that would be enough. But no. "Suppose someone comes from the east, saying that there's another prosperous nation over there to the east, and you could conquer that and be even wealthier. Would you do it?" And the king says, "Sure." "How about if there's another one to the west?" "To the north?" "To the south?" The king says, "Sure, in all cases." "How about a kingdom on the other side of the ocean?" The king would go for that, too.

So here we are. Even though the goods of the world—our bodies, our possessions, our relationships—keep changing on us, they're not really under our control, they can't really protect us from all the pains of life, and they're things we're going to leave behind anyhow, still we want more and more and more of them.

The whole purpose of this is to get a sense of *samvega*, of how futile the whole process is, with the realization that if we don't train the mind, we're just going to keep on doing it again and again and again.

That old story in the commentaries, about the Buddha seeing the old person and the sick person and the dead person, as if for the first time ever, illustrates his point as well. The important person, though, is the fourth person he sees, and that's the forest mendicant. He realizes, "If there's a way out, this is it." Go off and look into your mind, because that's where the craving comes from. Take the time. Provide yourself with the opportunity to really look into the mind and see what this craving comes from, what can be done to put an end to it. Otherwise you're going to be stuck in this continual wandering on, this continual sense of dissatisfaction, finding things that don't really provide any real satisfaction and yet you keep looking for them again and again and again.

As Ajaan Fuang once said, if there's anything that you really long for in this life, it's a sign that you had it in a previous lifetime and you miss it. And of course, even if you gain it this time around, you're going to lose it again. You're going to miss it again.

So the only way out is right here at the breath, where we develop these qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency that'll enable the mind to settle down and really watch itself. When it watches itself, it can begin to see: This is where craving arises; this is where it passes away. And what are the assumptions behind the craving? The mind has a tendency to paint things in all kinds of beautiful colors. But like any paint, the paint starts to wear off, it starts to blister, it starts to peel. It begins to fade. And it's only because we keep on painting and

painting and painting over and over and over again that we still feel attracted. But you've got to realize, it's all on the surface. There's no real satisfaction in these things.

It sounds pessimistic, but it's really more realistic. The Buddha said this is the way we live. When you look at other people's lives, you get a very strong sense of how futile human life can be. But for some reason, it's hard to look at your own life and see the same thing, unless you're willing to take that message from the forest mendicant, that you've got to look into your mind and do some serious work. Otherwise the process is endless.

Someone once asked the Buddha, "Will all the world eventually gain awakening? Will half of it gain awakening? A third?" And the Buddha didn't answer. Ven. Ananda, who was sitting by, was concerned that the man might go away dissatisfied that the Buddha, when asked an important question like this, faltered. So he took the man aside and said, "It's like a fortress with a wise gatekeeper. The gatekeeper wanders around the fortress, surveying the wall. He sees that the wall is totally solid, without even a crack big enough for a cat to slip through. Now, from that, he doesn't know how many people are going to come into the fortress, but he does know that if any sizable beings are going to come into the fortress, they've got to do it through the gate."

In the same way, the Buddha's knowledge of his awakening is that he knows that there is this one path: virtue, concentration, and discernment; or the noble eightfold path; or the different variations that we find in the Wings to Awakening. Anyone who's going to gain awakening will have to do it this way. But he doesn't know how many people are going to do it. There's no guarantee that we're all going to get there, but the Buddha does know that this is the way.

And he's not saying this simply because he was Indian, or because he lived 2,600 years ago, or because those were the assumptions of his culture. Actually, in many ways, his teaching was very contrary to Indian assumptions at the time. The truth of the path is a truth that holds for all time: that we've got to train the mind if we're going to find any true happiness, any happiness that's really worth the effort that goes into it, any happiness that's not going to let us down. So when the Buddha's pointing out the deficiencies of human life, it's not because he's pessimistic, it's because he wants to make sure we don't get stuck on these things that don't offer any real satisfaction.

I was reading recently a book saying that we get these ideals in our head that enlightenment is going to be a perfect happiness, but that's just an archetype. It's superhuman. When we don't let ourselves get too carried away by ideals like this, then we have room for human kindness, i.e., we let ourselves have a nice easy path,

rather than pushing ourselves too hard. And we're nice and easy on others. Well, that's not kindness at all. True kindness is when you point out the fact: This is the way to true happiness. It's going to be demanding, and you've got to be careful. If you don't follow this path, you're just setting yourself up for a lot more suffering. That's not being unkind or superhuman, or too demanding, it's just pointing out the fact: This is the way things are. That's the kindness there, in that it reminds you that you really do have to do this work, but it's going to be rewarded. There is this possibility. The teaching that says this is impossible: That's not kindness at all. It's cruelty. Cruelty with a friendly, smiling face. It's denying that there is this opportunity for true happiness. That's not helping anybody at all.

So sitting around thinking about how wonderful the world is, and learning how to appreciate the sunset, and saying that when you see the luminosity of the world in the evening when the sun is glowing in the west, that's an enlightenment: That's selling everybody short. It's closing off the way.

There are times when the sterner voice is the one that's really kind. Remember your teachers in school, the ones who were really stern. They demanded a high level of achievement, a high level of performance. As children, we probably didn't like them. But as you grow up you begin to reflect on it and to realize that those were the teachers who really cared. They were the ones who were really kind. They didn't let you get away with things just to make it easy for everybody.

In the same way, there will be times when the path is demanding, but always keep in mind the fact that it's worth it. And even though the teachings may sometimes sound negative, the import is positive. True happiness *is* possible, and this is the way it's done.