

Beyond Gratitude

November 25, 2010

Atta hi attano natho, the self is its own mainstay. The question is, how does that teaching fit in with the teachings on gratitude?

Look around at all your karmic debts. Some people say that a feeling of gratitude makes them feel warm and content, thinking about the kindnesses other people have done them. It makes them feel valued. But it's like playing roulette. Sometimes you find yourself indebted to people who are really difficult; other times, you feel a natural inclination to want to help the people who have helped you. It's all very uncertain. As the Buddha recognized, not everyone's parents are virtuous and kind and generous and wise. There are cases where you have karmic debts to some people you just really would rather not have anything to do with at all.

If the mind doesn't get trained, you're going to be continuing to find yourself placed in debt to other beings, other people, because your life depends on a lot of things outside you. When you're born as a human being, you're totally helpless. You have to depend on somebody to look after you. You need food, clothing, shelter, medicine. A lot of beings' lives get taken for that purpose. Other people have to work really hard. Building shelter is not an easy thing, growing food is not an easy thing, working in a clothing factory is not an easy thing.

So we're in this position where we're dependent on a lot of other beings, a lot of other people. On the one hand, you have to be grateful for their help, but on the other hand you'd rather not keep on putting yourself in a position where you have to be so dependent. Some people solve the problem by pretending that it's all a wonderful interconnected net. But look at the suffering involved in the interconnected system we live in: It's not really all that wonderful.

Other people deny that they have any debts at all. But that's like going down to the bank, after you've borrowed a lot of money, and telling them, "Okay, I don't have any debts to you anymore." The bank's not going to accept that. The debts are there.

This is why you want to learn how to look inside, to develop the good potentials that you already have so that you can make yourself your own mainstay, ultimately to the point where you repay your debts and don't have to depend on anyone else anymore. All of us have these potentials inside: the potential for virtue, the potential for concentration, the potential for discernment. They're all here in one form or another. So you start out by depending on whatever virtue you have, whatever concentration, whatever discernment you *do* have already. Then learn how to make it grow so that it's all-around.

Ajaan Chah says that Ajaan Mun used to talk about making the practice into the shape of a circle so that it's continuous: Your virtue is continuous. Your concentration, your discernment: They're all-around. If you look at what you have right now, it's like a fence around

a house where a lot of boards of the fence are missing. Animals can come in, thieves can come in, all kinds of things can come in through the gaps because the fence isn't all-around.

So you have to look at your virtue: In what areas are your precepts being kept? In what areas are they not being kept? Okay, you've got to work on those areas where they're not being kept.

As for sitting here with our eyes closed: We're working on our concentration and discernment. We do have some concentration already: simply the ability to read a book, to follow a conversation requires concentration. The question is, how you take that concentration and string it into longer periods of concentration? This is where mindfulness comes in: the ability to keep remembering. You've made up your mind you're going to stay with the breath, well, you've got to keep remembering that. That's the thread that holds everything together.

And you want to make the breath a good place to stay, so pay attention to how the breathing affects the different parts of the body. Notice: What kind of breathing feels good in the chest? What kind of breathing feels good in the stomach? What kind of breathing feels good in the shoulders? In the legs? In the arms? In the head? The in-and-out breath does affect the breath energy throughout the body, so you want to learn how to become sensitive to that and learn how to adjust things in a way that's not too heavy-handed.

Sometimes, if you force things too much, you give yourself a headache or a feeling of tightness in the chest. If there's a headache, think of your neck muscles relaxing, especially the muscles in the front, all the way down into the chest. If there's a tightness in the chest, think of the tightness spreading out and getting more dispersed, out the arms, out the fingers.

One of the best ways of developing concentration is to just get interested in the breath energy, exploring how this energy flows in your body. How do you make yourself more sensitive to it? What changes are good? What changes are not so good?

As you get interested in that issue, you find that it's easier and easier to stay concentrated, because you've got something that you're learning. You're exploring. It's not just a matter of forcing the mind to stay here against its will. You want to make it more willing.

Then, as a sense of ease begins to develop, you want to learn how to make the most of that. How do you spread it through the body? When you think in this way, the concentration becomes more continuous. You have to watch out, though. As things begin to settle down, there's a very natural tendency when things get comfortable in the body to just drift off. So try to prevent that by being as fully aware of the whole body as you can.

As for discernment, well, discernment is not a textbook kind of thing where you're going to have a certain number of insights in a certain order. It's more a matter of dealing with each defilement as it comes up. Anything that's going to come up and disturb your concentration, you treat it as a defilement. As Ajaan Maha Boowa once said, the defilements don't line up like children in a school. They don't come and call out their names. Something simply comes into

the mind to distract you: Sometimes it's anger, sometimes it's delusion, sometimes it's greed, sometimes it's fear, sometimes it's lust. Sometimes they're heavy cases; sometimes they're light.

This means that you have to be ready for whatever comes up and deal with whatever comes up, learning how to recognize when a misunderstanding has come in and taken over the mind. You've suddenly decided, for instance, that you'd rather not be here with the breath but rather be thinking about what you did last week or what kind of dinner you're going to have tomorrow or the people you're going to talk to the next day. You have to catch yourself and learn how to argue with those defilements. Sometimes your argument can simply be, "Hey, this is not what we're here for right now," and that's enough. Other times, you have to remind yourself of the drawbacks of that kind of thinking. Where is that going to take you?

In other words, you have to learn how to pull yourself out. Sometimes you pull yourself back to the breath and you notice that the thought that had distracted you has created a pattern of tension in some part of the body. Allow that to relax, dissolve away. Then the thought will go away as well.

You have to learn how to use whatever tricks work for freeing you at least temporarily from that distraction. This is the beginning of discernment. As you learn how to deal with one particular defilement, you can start developing a skill set for how to deal with other ones, and then other ones.

For example, with the hindrances: Don't expect that they'll just come neatly in a row, starting with sensual desire, going on to ill will, and then sloth and torpor, then restlessness and anxiety, or doubt. They don't line up in that way. They come willy-nilly. But the practice you gain in learning how to deal with whatever is coming up will serve you in good stead and you can apply it to other defilements as well.

They say that once the king of Thailand came to see Luang Puu Dune, one of Ajaan Mun's early students, and asked him what defilements should be dealt with first. Luang Puu Dune replied, "Whatever comes up first, deal with that one first."

So in protecting your concentration, you're getting practice in developing discernment. It may not look like the list of insights given in the commentaries. But those lists are artificial. They came later; the Buddha himself never taught them. And even though those lists may be convenient for explaining things in a classroom, you have to realize that, to use another analogy from the forest ajaans, it's like going out into battle. Things that happen in the battle aren't going to come in the same list that they use, say, in a strategy course in a military academy. You learn basic principles and then you suddenly find that some of the subtler principles have to be used first and some of the more blatant ones come later, depending on what's happening in the battle. Sometimes things come up that you haven't studied, and you have to figure out how to deal with those problems on your own.

This is how your discernment becomes more all-around. It's based on the determination that you're not going to let yourself get hoodwinked by whatever comes up. Sometimes you

find yourself equal to the task and other times not quite so equal to the task, but still you do what you can. That's how discernment grows.

This is how you become more and more your own mainstay, by developing the potentials you have inside, by making them all-around.

Ultimately, as the Buddha said, you get to the point where you don't have to come back. You don't have to incur those debts anymore. They say the fully awakened one is someone who eats the almsfood of the country without incurring any debt at all. Up until that point, though, we're all incurring debts. So we have work to do to make ourselves really free.

The blessing in this is that if you become that kind of person, then the people who give you alms and the people who give you help in any way find that the results are multiplied many times over. In fact, this is one of the motivations the Buddha gives for getting rid of your defilements: The people who help you then receive great blessings that more than repay the help they give. This is the ultimate way in which you pay back your debts without incurring new ones. And it's only then that you're really free.

In one of his verses in the Dhammapada, the Buddha talks about the arahant as being *akataññu*. It's one of those verses that's meant to shock. The word *kataññu* means grateful. *Akataññu* means not grateful, not knowing what was done, but it also means knowing what has not been done, knowing what has not been made, i.e., knowing the unconditioned. You can reflect on that verse and find many levels of meaning, but at the very least it means someone who's made him or herself a genuine mainstay with no need to depend on anyone else.