

A Rare Gift

August 2002

When you're meditating at the same time there's a Dhamma talk, 99.5% of your attention should be with the breath and only half a percent with the Dhamma talk itself.

The sound is here to act as a fence. If you find yourself losing touch with the breath, the sound of the talk is here to remind you to come back, stay with the breath, to keep your mind centered right with the breath. You don't have to send your attention out to the talk. If there's anything really relevant to your issues, what's going on in your mind right now, it'll come right in. And if it's not relevant, then it's a distraction. Let it go past.

You read about people who gained awakening during the Buddha's talks, as in the chant we recited just now: all those thousand monks who gained awakening listening to the Buddha's Fire Sermon. They were paying most attention to their own minds while they were listening. The talk simply nudged them here and nudged them there, but it was the fact that they were focused inside that enabled the talk to make a difference.

So stay right here with the breath and let the talk fade into the background. If there's something that's really important, it'll stand out on its own.

After all, when you think about it, you don't have much time. Life is short. You want to make sure you put the time you have to the best use. And the best use is training your own mind.

Everything else you do comes out of the mind. Whether it's things you do with the body, words you say with your speech, it all has to come from the mind. Your interactions with other people are going to be skillful or unskillful based on how well your mind is trained. So this should be the prime focus, your first priority when you're looking at your life to decide what's important, what needs to be done.

There's that famous passage where the Buddha recommends that every night, as the sun goes down, remind yourself: You could die in the night. Are you ready to go? What unfinished business do you have? Well, focus on doing what needs to be done. Focus on what has first priority so that the night won't be wasted, so that if death does happen to come in the night, you won't be all tied up with regrets. Sometimes what has to be done is related to our dealings with other people; sometimes it has to do with our inner work. But right now, we're with our inner work, so this is where you should be focused.

The same principle applies every morning. When the sun rises, don't just sit there and say, "What a beautiful sun!" admiring all those god beams coming through folds in the clouds. Remind yourself: This might be your last sunrise. Do you have any unfinished business? Okay, get to work on what needs to be done.

Sometimes the work means putting your mind at ease, putting your mind at rest. This is one of the big paradoxes in the practice. On the one hand, there has to be a sense of spiritual urgency, a sense of *samvega* that things really have to be done and you can't waste time. But on the other hand, what is the path? The heart of the path is concentration, mental stillness, mental ease. So it's a matter of learning how to balance those two. Use the ease to make a difference in the mind—not just as a place to hang out or to be comfortable—but use this sense of ease that you can develop in the practice as a means for getting better and better insights into the mind, seeing things more and more clearly.

That sense of *samvega* has to be balanced by confidence: confidence that when you do make a change in your state of mind, it's going to have an impact on all the rest of your life. Often, once you're more at ease inside, it's a lot easier to deal with difficult people outside, difficult situations outside, because you don't feel so threatened, you're not so caught up. This is why that ability to separate out a little bit is so important.

That's what we're doing right now: learning how to separate the mind out from its normal concerns. Give it a chance to have a space of inner well-being, a space of inner ease, so that you're not weighing it down so much with your own problems. Once you're not weighing the mind down with problems all the time, not weighing it down with stress and suffering, you find that it can bear the affairs of the world a lot more easily. You can see what needs to be done, what really has to be done, and you can do it, without the sense that you're already overburdened, thinking, "Who has time for all the oughts and the shoulds of the world?" because you're so weighed down with your own stuff.

This is why work on your mind is a gift to other people as well. The fewer burdens you carry of your own, the more you can take on other issues outside.

So this is not a selfish practice. One of the major misunderstandings about meditation is that you're just doing it for yourself. But if you straighten out your mind, it means that you're not subjecting other people to your greed, anger, and delusion. If you straighten out your mind, and have a greater sense of ease, well-being—you're not constantly piling all sorts of extra stress and suffering on top of yourself—then you're in a better position to be helpful, to show compassion to other people, to have the time, the energy, the will to help.

This is another reason why meditation has top priority. This is why it's the most important thing that should come to mind when you look at the sunset or when you look at the sunrise: What shape is your mind in? Have you finished your internal work? Think of that work as a gift, both to yourself and to the world—not so much a duty as an opportunity. How many people, in how many situations, don't have the time or the opportunity to meditate? Here you've got this opportunity. It's your gift to yourself, your gift to the world around you. So make it a good gift.

The value of the mind increases as it becomes more and more one. Don't think that when the mind has just lots of stuff inside that it has more value. I remember in Thailand one time, I

was going past a market and there was only one durian, which is a very highly prized food over there. There was one single durian in the market, and its price was way out of sight. Nobody could buy it because it was so expensive, so rare. I'd go back a month later, though, and the place was overcome with durian, in fact they were throwing it to the dogs. It's the same with the mind. If there's only one mind, if there's only one focus to your mind, it's has a lot more value. It's a lot more valuable, it's a lot more rare.

When you're going to give a gift to the world, give it a rare gift. Give it a gift that has value both for yourself and for the people around you.