

No Running Away

March 20, 2008

One of the important things to understand as you come to practice the Dhamma is that you're not running away from anything.

If you want to run away from the human race: You come out here and what have you got? You're sitting here under a tree, you're sitting with a member of the human race. You want to run away from your body: You're sitting there with your body. You want to run away from the issues of the mind: You find that when things are quiet, the issues have more space to come and confront you.

So once you realize there's no place to run away, what do you do? You have to turn around and learn how to deal with these things. If it's something unskillful in the mind, you have to learn how to reason with it. You can't just push it away and pretend it's not there. You have to enter into a dialogue.

As for the body, before you drop attachment to the body, you're got to learn that the body has its good side.

We were discussing today: We sit with the body, sit with the breath and things get out of balance: The properties that can help bring it back into balance are right there in the body as well. If things feel too heavy, too dense, that's the earth element. The earth element is balanced out by the wind or breath element. If things get too hot, you've got the water element to cool things off. If you feel dizzy and light-headed, the earth element can help get you grounded.

You want to learn how to get in touch with these things and bring them into balance. You can't run away from them, so learn how to actually more intimately involved with them—but with the right understanding, that it's only when you sort things out in this way that you can finally let go. Not out of aversion, but out of dispassion.

You've seen how far these properties can go and you get on good terms with them before you say goodbye. That way, your letting go is not neurotic, not based on unskillful motivation. It comes from understanding. The body has its good points but they go only so far. And you've found something that goes farther.

The same with issues in the mind: Some people come to meditation hoping they can just shut everything down in the mind. They won't have to think, they won't have to deal with anything, just push things out. Well, the more you push things out, the more they come rebounding back to you. You've got to learn how to sit down and talk things through, enter into a dialogue.

For instance, when you're doing goodwill meditation, try to feel goodwill for

yourself. And if you have trouble wishing happiness for yourself, you've got to ask yourself, "Well, why?" It makes no sense not to be able to wish happiness for yourself. What secret issues do you have or issues that you haven't uncovered? You've got to learn how to dig them out.

This is where mindfulness and concentration come in to help, because they provide you with the good place you need to sit down and talk. If the playing field isn't level, if there are lots of places where you can hide, the dialogue doesn't get anywhere. You have to have good neutral ground in which you can stand and talk things over.

Because every impulse in the mind is an impulse aimed toward pleasure, aimed toward happiness. The problem is that a lot of our impulses are based on twisted ideas about where that happiness could lie. So you've got to learn how to talk with your various impulses.

And that means, one, admitting they're there. It's all too easy, when you think thoughts of goodwill for everybody out there, for it to be as if you're spreading marshmallow cream over the whole world. The people you like and the people you don't like all become buried in the marshmallow cream. As a result, everybody gets invisible. All you see is the marshmallow cream.

But that's not goodwill, or at least, not honest goodwill. Honest goodwill goes through all the people, "Is there anybody out there that you really have trouble feeling goodwill for?" And you have to ask yourself, "Why? What do you gain by having ill will for somebody? Why would you want that person to suffer?"

And part of your mind will say, "Well, they did this and they did that, either to me or people I like or people I pity." So tell it, "Okay, all right, that's not right, what they did. But if they start suffering, is that going to make everything better? Or are they just going to want more revenge?"

When you wish goodwill, remember that you're wishing true happiness for that person, not simply that the person will have lots of wealth and lots of influence and lots of whatever else he or she wants. You're hoping that that person will understand, "Oh, true happiness comes this way," and will start acting on that understanding. If everybody were acting on a correct understanding of where happiness comes from, the whole world would be a much better place.

So it really is in your best interest to wish happiness, true happiness, for everyone.

Or if you try to sit and concentrate and you find that part of the mind resists—say, it starts putting you to sleep, getting you bored—you've got to ask, "Okay, what would you rather be doing?" And if the mind says, "Well, I'd rather be thinking, I'm much more used to thinking." Okay, well, give it something to think

about, something useful.

You can go through the parts of the body. Where are your bones right now?—the different bones in the skeleton. When you think of the bones, say, in your fingers, actually pay attention to how your fingers feel. Is there a tension in your fingers around the bones? If there is, let it relax. Then move up your hands, past the wrists, past the forearms, past the elbows, the upper arms, the shoulder on either side. And then start with your toes, going up the legs and the spine. In other words, be aware of your body but at the same time give yourself something to think about, something to do.

Or you could vary things by looking at how the breath feels in the different parts of the body. Try to get as precise as you can, each little part of the body, starting again with the tips of the fingers and on up. When you breathe in, how does it feel in that part of the body? Do you carry tension around in that part of the body? Can you relax it?

So, if the mind gets bored, give it work to do. Dhamma work. Mindfulness work. In other words, learn how to negotiate inside. If you find that there's a resistance or reasonable resistance to something you're trying to do, learn how to negotiate with it. That way, the different parts of the mind can feel more at home with one another. They can actually have real conversations, open and honest conversations, frank conversations.

In this way, the mind becomes less and less of a mystery to you. And you can become more and more confident in your motivation—not only as you sit here with your eyes closed but also when you're dealing with other people.

It's normal that we want all our issues to be cleared up as quickly as possible. We would all like to have that magic pill or that sudden insight that clears up all our problems. But it turns out it doesn't work out that way.

What does work out is that you deal with things issue by issue, problem by problem as they come up. The more skillfully you learn how to deal with these little things, then the more easily the bigger issues start getting resolved. At the very least, they get easier to handle, because you're developing sensitivity, you're developing a sense of trust in the mind, an openness in the mind.

These things don't happen all at once. They develop gradually. As you work on this gradual process, things get clearer inside. Because there are fewer walls set up, you don't pretend that the unskillful thoughts aren't there. You admit that they're there and you learn how to deal with them. This way, when the mind becomes clear, you begin to see how to handle difficulties inside. Once you learn how to handle them inside, it gets easier to do it outside as well.

In fact, the two processes go together. Often people who have a lot of problems

holding rational conversations inside their own mind come from homes where there were problems in holding rational conversations between people. If that's the case, try to think of someone you know who does handle problems well. And think of that person coming into your mind to sort things out, to talk rationally with the irrational elements.

Ajaan Fuang occasionally would have people come with problems of spirit possession. We in the West would say, "Well, was it really spirit possession or was it schizophrenia?" But the problems were real and there really was another personality in that person. Whether it was that person's second personality or something from outside, either way he'd spread thoughts of goodwill to both sides. Then he'd start a dialogue: "Why are you here? What do you want?" And he was able to negotiate a settlement.

So whether that was actually an exorcism or simply just straightening something out inside—regardless of how you interpret it, it worked.

One of his students was a woman who would, out of nowhere, yell and scream at people who were her close friends. As a result, she couldn't live with anybody. She had to live alone.

One day she came to see Ajaan Fuang, and all of a sudden the yelling and screaming side started coming out. So Ajaan Fuang asked her, "Okay, what do you want?" And the other side started saying, "Well, in a previous lifetime this woman did this or did that to me." And Ajaan Fuang asked the voice, "Well, if you interfere with this woman's life, she's going to come and interfere with your life next time around. Do you want that?" "... no." "How about letting her live a normal life, make merit, and dedicate the merit to you? Does that make sense? Would that satisfy you?" "Yes." So that was the resolution.

So if parts of your mind are pulling in opposite directions, try to think of someone like Ajaan Fuang coming in and sorting things out, with reason and goodwill, letting both sides speak and working out your differences. Because it is possible to work out differences based on the assumption that everything going on in the mind wants true happiness.

It's just that there are lots of very misinformed impulses in the mind who don't know where true happiness lies, what it would be, how you would get there. But if you go in with the confidence that things can be sorted out, then when the time comes to let go, you're letting go not out of anger or fear. You're letting go out of understanding.

After all, that's the Buddha's analysis. It's through discernment that you let go. This doesn't have to be the sort of discernment you read about in books. It simply means the discernment of how to handle things in the mind: how to test the

limits of physical properties in your body, of the thoughts in your mind. See how far they go in leading to true happiness and then let them go when you find something better.

This way, when you say goodbye, it's not saying goodbye slamming the door, running away. It's more like, "Thanks for getting me here, but the time has come to move on."

So it's a gradual process, this path we're following: insights here and there, greater skill developing incrementally here and there. But it's the only process that works.