

## *Timeless Practice*

*February 8, 2010*

Ajaan Maha Boowa tells of the time when he was a young monk studying in Bangkok. His plan was to complete the third grade of Pali studies and then go out to practice. But the one thing that kept them back was a teaching that was circulating around Bangkok at the time, which was that the paths and fruitions, even the practice of jhāna, were no longer possible, that the time for these things had passed.

It was only when he was able to get past that teaching to realize it didn't really fit in with the principle that the Dharma is timeless: That's when he was able to go out and really practice.

You see this teaching cropping up here and there, sometimes in the Theravada where they talk about no more openings for nibbana, no more openings even for jhana. Or in some the Mahayana sects where they talk about the Dharma-ending age. You have to regard these teachings simply as obstacles, as excuses for people who don't want to practice. Or, in the case of Thailand early in the 20th century, it was excuse for the government to get monks to get involved in starting an educational system, to do things besides their basic practice of virtue, concentration, and discernment, leading to release.

But those excuses have no force if you don't want them to have any force. It's up to you to decide whether you're going to make this your Dhamma-ending age, or Dhamma-opening age, because the Dhamma is a truth that's always true. If you practice virtue, concentration, and discernment, and develop all the qualities the Buddha described, either in the five strengths or in the four bases for success or the seven factors for awakening, that path is going to take you to the goal, regardless of what time or age you're in. It's your choice.

But as Ajaan Fuang once said, to achieve that timeless goal and to follow that timeless path, you have to make your practice timeless as well. It's not something you do just on weekends or at certain hours of the day and not at other hours of the day. It's got to be continuous, something you keep at regardless of what you're doing outside.

The monastery does have a schedule. There's the time for work. There's a time for sitting with your eyes closed. There's time for eating, time for cleaning up, times for being with other people, time for being alone. But you shouldn't take those times as excuses for not sticking with the breath, for not developing the mind. Each time period has its own challenges, but you want to learn how to keep

with the breath, keep grounded, keep centered, regardless of what those challenges are. Otherwise, the day gets divided up into times, chopped up into little bits, and your practice gets chopped up into little bits, doesn't develop any momentum, doesn't develop any strength.

But you can make up your mind that whatever you're going to do, you're going to make it an aspect of the practice. When you're working or dealing with other people, you can practice restraint of the senses. After all, you do have to look and listen and engage in all your senses. So there's your task right there: noticing how you create fetters around what you see and hear and smell and taste and touch, and think about. As the Buddha said, the sights are not a fetter, your eye is not a fetter. It's the clinging, the delight, the passion that you have for the eye or for sights: That's the fetter there. And the same with what you hear. The things you hear, the fact that you can hear, is not a fetter.

Some people think that for concentration, they've got to block out all their senses. That's not what the Buddha taught. As he said, the senses are not a fetter. The fetter is sensuality. To get into concentration, he says you seclude yourself from sensuality, which means that you seclude yourself from your obsession with thinking about sensual things. You learn to drop that because that's the fetter. We tend to delight a lot more in our fantasies about sensual pleasures than we do in the pleasures themselves.

As you go through the day, notice how you look at things, how you listen to things, where you're trying to stir up passions, where you're trying to stir up aversion or delusion by the way you look, by the way you listen. If there's somebody don't like and you take delight in seeing that person do something wrong, that just furthers your dislike, justifies it. But is that healthy for the mind? If you see someone who's attractive, there's a tendency to focus on whatever is attractive about them, and to ignore the fact the human body, every human body, has a lot of unattractive features.

Last week on our way to Zion, we happened to go through Las Vegas, and there was a sign for the body exhibition where they have plasticized corpses displayed showing what's inside the body. It was right next to a strip show. That shows you the human mind's amazing ability to compartmentalize: one kind of stripping next to another kind of stripping. The human mind has an amazing ability to close off certain details when he doesn't want to notice them. When we see that in other people, we find it amusing. The thing is that it's going on our own engagement with the senses all the time.

So as you're going around today, restraint of the senses is one thing you can practice all the time. That's one way of maintaining your center—and, at the same

time, maintaining your center is also one way of restraining your senses. You try to keep this sense of being with the breath, being in the body, being sensitive to the energy flow in the body, regardless of what you're looking at or listening to. When you notice that you've lost that inner sense, you know that you've been sucked into the world of your senses. You want to immediately check: What was it that sucked you in? What was your intention in allowing yourself to get sucked in?

Restraint of speech is another way that you can practice throughout the day. Be very careful about what you say. Think of Ajaan Fuang's dictum: You can't control your mind until you learn how to control your tongue. This is very important. You want to make sure that the things you say are not only true, but also beneficial and timely. The question Ajaan Fuang would have you ask is: Is it really necessary to say this? Often it's not. If it's not necessary, be quiet. And if you become known for being a quiet person, that's perfectly fine. We're in a monastery. That's okay. You don't have to be entertaining. You don't have to be witty. You don't have to show off your intelligence or show off anything at all.

This is how you develop mindfulness. Remember the Buddha's image for mindfulness is of a gatekeeper in a fortress who has to be very careful about who he lets in and who doesn't let in, who he lets out and who he doesn't let out. We sometimes hear mindfulness defined as a very open and choiceless awareness. But that's not the Buddha's definition. His definition is the ability to see what's coming in, see what's going on, immediately gauge its level of skill, whether it's appropriate or not, and be very firm about shutting down the things that are unskillful and allowing only the things that are skillful.

Another aspect of timeless practice is simply observing the precepts, making sure that your actions cause no harm. If you find yourself breaking any of the precepts, that carelessness is going to come into the mind. And whatever regret that comes from having harmed either yourself or other people becomes an obstacle. Either you deny that harm, in which case you set up even more ignorance in the mind, or you wound yourself again and again and again with regret. So either way, whether it's an open wound or a scabbed-over wound, it's an obstacle to keeping the mind centered and concentrated.

There are two other qualities the Buddha lists as appropriate for a new monk and are appropriate for everybody who practices. One is finding seclusion in quiet places, preferably out in the wilderness if you can. If you can't, then find a quiet spot where you're not disturbed, so that you really can look directly at the mind.

The second is developing right view. This may require some reading, require some listening, but with the view that your actions are important, it's not a question of whether this is a Dhamma-ending age or a Dhamma-opening age, or

whatever age. It's your actions that determine whether you're going to the Dhamma of finding an opening. And the skills you need can be developed if you're intent on developing them, if you don't put up obstacles to yourself.

So as you do this, you find that your practice does become timeless because it's there, it's there, it's there, all the time. You're engaged in the practice all the time. As you go through the day, you may find that there will be lapses. Well, notice when they happen, and as quickly as possible get yourself back into center again.

I mentioned the other day Ajaan Fuang's instruction that if you're doing a task and you find that you've lost your center, stop for a second, regain your center, and then continue. If find yourself wandering off in greed, anger, lust, jealousy, envy—whatever the unskillful emotion—stop. Gather the mind. Then you can continue with whatever task you've got going.

This way, you begin to bridge those gaps in your mindfulness, so that it does become continuous. It just keeps going and going and going and going and it doesn't really have to rest, doesn't really have to stop, because in the fact of being mindful, being centered, there's rest there already. It takes practice because this is a new habit. But once the habit takes hold, you find that this is a much better way of going through the day. You're more refreshed, more energized, and you're not placing obstacles in your own path.

So whether the Dhamma's going to be timeless for you depends on how timeless you make your practice. It's up to you.