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Liberation and Precepts

from a Dhamma talk by Ajahn Jayasāro

The practice of Dhamma is something which stands up to scrutiny. It is something which invites investigation, invites scepticism, invites questions. This is not a teaching in which we adopt a certain book and use its teaching as a code by which we translate the meanings of experience, and take refuge in the sense of security that comes from having a book that explains everything. In the practice of Dhamma we are encouraged to be brave enough to challenge ourselves, challenge what monks say, challenge the things that we read. As we practice more and more, we have this confidence that the Dhamma stands up to intense scrutiny and intense investigation.

There is a principle, a simple rule of thumb which I've always found very useful in deciding what is true and what is false: If something is false, the closer you look at it the more diffuse, the less clear it becomes. Whereas if something is true, the closer you look, the clearer it becomes. So the teachings of the Buddha need to be brought within, need to be looked at closely and put to the test. In some ways, the Dhamma is similar to a science. In scientific discourse it is important that something can be proved experimentally before it can be taken on as a theory. But not every law or scientific theory can be proven by everyone, simply because so much scientific research uses technology which is extremely expensive. If you do not have the financial resources, no matter how clever, how smart you are, you cannot ever prove that theory for yourself without access to that technology. Similarly, in the Dhamma, although theoretically you can prove the truth of all the teachings (or the core teachings, at least), it is dependent on having a mind which is sufficiently mature to act as a vessel for Dhamma. Most importantly the mind needs a certain sense of stability and clarity.

In contrast with most of the major world religions which I characterize as belief systems, I characterize Buddhism as an education system. But if Buddhism is an education system, then where is the classroom? The answer is: in the present moment. You embark upon this education system when you

develop the ability to be awake and aware in the present moment.

The word 'Buddha' means 'the Awakened One', or means the quality of wakefulness. That is the essence of practice on every level—the ability to be awake. I am sure you have had an experience of suddenly waking up in the middle of the night. Maybe there is been a bang or some disturbance, and all of a sudden you are wide awake. You haven't yet thought anything. There is no conceptual thought in your mind, there is just this clear bright clarity of wakefulness. In Buddhist practice, that's the kind of state of mind which you are trying to develop more systematically, so that an alert clarity becomes part of your way of living in the world.

"Being mindful in daily life" is one of those phrases that you hear an awful lot and sounds quite attractive, but it is very difficult to do. Perhaps some of you will say it is too difficult in a very busy city and living the kind of lives that you do. But there is a simile which may be useful. Consider a woman who has a small child. There are no mothers who can be totally focused on their child twenty-four hours a day since they have other duties to perform. But a mother who is working at home—cleaning, or cooking, or working on the computer, or writing—would at the same time always have a sense of exactly where her child is, whether the child is safe or in danger, whether the child is happy or sad, and exactly what is going on with her child—even though to an observer she would seem to be doing something else altogether.

The mother's awareness of her child is analogous to the kind of awareness of mind that one seeks to develop in everyday life—that sensitivity to the changes that are going on throughout the day. The short-term changes, the fluctuations of thoughts and feelings, and the more subtle moods which fluctuate throughout the day, or throughout a week even. This is where we begin to study and learn and practice the Buddha's teachings more and more effectively.

It is quite natural for most of us to consider the world divided into two things: the things we like, and

the things we do not like. Although we may not like to consider it so bluntly, a great deal of our lives even as adults is taken up with trying to maximize the experience of things we like, and trying to minimize contact with things or people that we do not like. Our sense of ease in life is often measured by our success in that endeavour. We think, "Oh, things are wonderful these days. I do not have to work with anybody I do not like. I do not have to do the things that I do not like. I can do what I want when I want". Of course this is one of the reasons why wealth and money are so coveted, because it does give us the power to set up conditions for ourselves in which we can, to a certain extent, reduce or eliminate the necessity to experience things and people we do not like, and to maximize the experience of things and people we do like. But in the end it is a frustrating way to live our lives, because even if we are experiencing a lot of things that we like, the intensity of pleasure that we receive from them is not stable.

Anything that is pleasant is subject to the law of diminishing returns. You get a certain amount of pleasure out of it the first time, and then after a few times you do not get so much pleasure, so you have to increase the stimulus to get the same amount of pleasure. This goes on and on. In the coarsest expression of this, people who take drugs find a certain level of drug taking gives them the feeling that they crave, then after a while they have to increase the dose. This dynamic not restricted to drug use. It is the story of the whole sensual realm. Our nervous system cannot stand too much pleasure. Our bodies need change. We cannot sit still for more than a few seconds at a time without having to move the body slightly. So the search for 'the pleasant' always has a certain admixture of pain. The shadow of separation always hangs over our pleasure.

In romantic movies and books the young couple looking up at the full moon in the garden say, "I wish this night could last forever!" Why do they say that? You would only say that if you knew that it is not going to last forever. There is a sense that even when things are wonderful, in the back of our minds we are thinking, "It is all downhill from here. It is probably never going to be any better than this". That sense of exhilaration ("Wow! This is the best it is ever been!") is very hard to separate from that flickering, sad thought, "Yes, but it is never going to be any better than this, and perhaps it is never going to be as good as this again". It is just normal, isn't it? It is just a normal part of life. Of course, when separation does take place, often it is a shock. People

say, "I never thought that would ever happen". Why not? Why is it so impossible to imagine? Every kind of separation takes place all the time, all around us. But part of our strategy for dealing with that decline of pleasure and happiness and fulfilment and that shadowy sense of pending separation and pain and grief is that we just try to shut our minds down—do not think about it. "I do not want to think about that. It is morbid. That'll just make you depressed. Look on the bright side of life".

The idea in Buddhism is opening up to the truth of things, both the side that we find pleasant and the side that we find unpleasant. The moment we start to censor our experience, when we say, "I only want to think about this", or, "That just makes me anxious, that just makes me fearful", you are creating paper tigers in your mind and you give energy to those negative qualities. By not thinking about these things you defeat the purpose you set out to achieve.

Being in the present moment is not a goal in itself, and it's not about being blissed out. Being in the present moment is just basic mental health. It is the conditioning factor for growth in Dhamma in order to really know what life is all about—not as a philosophy, not as a complex intellectual structure, but as direct experience. What is body? What are feelings? What are perceptions? What are thoughts? What is sense-consciousness? Not as some elaborate abhidhamma exercise, but as a direct experience.

Being in the present moment is a revolution in our way of living life. We begin to notice the process-nature of experience, rather than obsessing about the content of experience. The emphasis shifts naturally. We find things arising by themselves. For instance, you experience a yawn or a sneeze as something that just arises. You do not decide to sneeze. You do not decide to yawn. It just happens. And so, in the same way, do thoughts, feelings and emotions. And this is the weird thing—intention, thought, and feeling arise first, and the one who is thinking and feeling arises subsequent to the thought. From a philosophical point of view this could be debatable, but this is something we can observe very clearly by being in the present moment. Common sense says that first there is someone who is thinking, and then you have a thought. Is that what really happens? Have you ever developed a clarity, stability, a sharpness of mind with which you can really look directly at what is going on? Some of our most cherished assumptions are overturned quite radically when we are willing to do that, to really look and see

what's going on here. It is liberating.

“Liberation” is the word that the Buddha used to sum up all of his teachings. In the traditional presentation of Buddhadhamma it is said that there are 84000 teachings and that they all have a single flavour. Just as all the waters of all the oceans of the world have a single salty flavour, so all the teachings of the Buddha have this single flavour of liberation.

When we are practicing generosity, sharing, giving to others, it is a liberating practice if done in the sense that the Buddha taught it. There has to be a liberation from attachment to material things, a liberation from meanness, a liberation from stinginess. This is how we develop this very first stage of letting go. We let go on a material level; let go of our attachment to money and to wealth. When we practice generosity wisely, we have to start thinking about other people, which is a meditation in itself. If we are going to give something to somebody we have to think about what they might want. What would make them happy? We are liberating ourselves from the self-centred point of view. We are taking into consideration somebody else's wishes, someone else's happiness. This is liberating and that is why there is so much joy that comes from giving and sharing.

When you can share and not want anyone else to know about it, that is the most wonderful kind of sharing. The Thai idiom for this practice is “attaching gold leaf to the back of the Buddha”. If you put the gold leaf on the front of the Buddha, everyone can see it. If you put the gold leaf on the back of the Buddha, nobody can see it, but you know that it is there. That is a more liberating kind of giving than one in which someone expects something. Basking in words of praise and appreciation can lessen the liberating power of giving. If you give and you desire something in return then you get less merit than if you give without expecting anything.

Keeping precepts is also a practice of liberation. There is a great deal of misunderstanding of the role of precepts and *sīla*, or ‘morality’, in Buddhist practice. Keeping precepts and leading a moral life is not some sort of preliminary practice. It is in itself the practice of Dhamma. It is in itself the development of mindfulness.

The Thai word for *sati*, which is usually translated into English as mindfulness, is ‘*kwahm raleuk dy*’ or ‘recollection’. One important aspect of mindfulness is the recollecting of what needs to be recollected at any time and place. It is a form of

non-forgetting and may include not only the bearing in mind of a meditation object, but also certain teachings or appropriate information. Mindfulness is not a floating nebulous ‘awareness’. You cannot just be mindful. You always have to be mindful of something. In meditation you are mindful of a particular object, but in daily life what can you be mindful of? It is the failure to ask this question and therefore being left with a lack of clear objects for mindfulness that helps to explain why it is so easy to get distracted in daily life. On a more subtle level you can be mindful of thoughts and emotions and so on, but it is important to have an object of recollection that is a little more concrete and coarse and it is the precepts which provide this function. We are mindful of precepts. In other words, when we are keeping precepts we are practicing mindfulness.

The Buddha said that the essence of *sīla* or ‘morality’ is *cetanā* or ‘intention’. *Cetanā* is also the essence of kamma. From this we can see the fundamental importance of *cetanā*. We are only going to be effective in our efforts to avoid creating bad kamma, and our efforts to create good kamma, when we have some real time awareness of *cetanā* or ‘intention’. So how are you aware of intention? It is difficult. It is very difficult to keep track of a moving object, if the background for that moving object is multi-coloured and unstable. But if you have a plain background and you have a grid, then you can follow the movements of a moving object much more easily. We can plot it moving say from square A3 to B4 to C6. Having that grid is extremely helpful, and the precepts form the same kind of grid—a matrix or framework in which one can see the complex movements of the mind when they start to lead on to actions of body and speech which constitute bad kamma and create problems both for one's self and others in the present and the future.

Take the first precept: We make a clear-cut determination not to harm any living creature, even if it is frightening or dangerous or irritating. Now we are no longer taking seriously or identifying with the intention to harm. By consciously, willingly, voluntarily taking on as a life principle the intention not to harm, we immediately illuminate, whenever it arises, the intention to harm. We become mindful of the arising of the intention to harm because we are sincere in our intention not to harm. Similarly with the other precepts. This is why keeping precepts is not a preliminary to the practice of the Dhamma, it lies right at the very heart of practice.

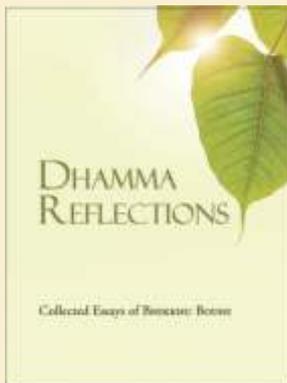
We can expand this practice of *sīla* from the

five precepts, which forms its most basic level. In the monk's life we have a large number of precepts that we use as pegs for mindfulness. Notice how I have put my bag here. That is not just by accident. I have been taught that I have to fold it like that. There are many rules like this that monks keep, many of them not directly concerned with refraining from unwholesome activities, but designed to bolster mindfulness and keep us grounded in the present moment.

In the West, we tend to have a rather difficult, dysfunctional relationship with rules. We feel that rules are something imposed upon us, and we often feel impelled to rebel against them, and that there is something noble in doing so, and indeed, sometimes there is. My idea about practising with rules—and this is speaking from the experience of living within the boundaries of the Buddhist monastic code for over thirty years now—is that it is like a musician playing a piece of classical music.

If you listen to a violin concerto, I doubt that you will think: "That poor violinist has got no freedom at all. Every single note that comes from his musical instrument was decided for him two or three hundred years ago by Mozart". We do not consider that someone's creativity in that context is constrained or compromised by the necessity to follow the score. On the contrary, the score becomes the vehicle of expression for the musician. This is true in other arts as well. There is a famous quote by Robert Frost about free verse, which he rejected. He liked to write rhyming verse and said that writing free verse would be like playing tennis with the net down. The very constraints of having a net makes tennis interesting. Just so, when we voluntarily take on certain restraints, deciding not to do certain things, with a clear understanding of the value of doing so and the sufferings inherent in not doing so, we do not feel imprisoned or constrained at all. Quite the opposite. The practice

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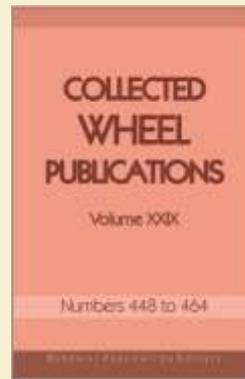
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