

## *Relating to Results*

*February, 2003*

Sometimes we're told that in our practice of meditation, and in our approach to practice of the Buddha's teachings as a whole, we shouldn't be attached to results.

Now, this statement can be taken in a wrong way and a right way. The wrong way would be that we don't care about the results, that we just do what we want to do and let the chips fall where they may, convinced in the rightness of our intentions. That's a recipe for disaster, because one of the first things we have to learn is that we can't totally trust our intentions. After all, we're here to learn what our intentions are, and the best way for testing them is to see how they bear out in action, what results they give. If something seems like a good intention, you follow it, and then you watch to see what the results are. Many times the results turn out different from what you expected, in which case there was something wrong with the intention. It wasn't skillful enough.

So this statement of not being attached to the results of our actions—if it's going to make any sense in the practice—has to mean something else. And there are two ways that it can be taken in a useful way. One is if we realize that certain things are beyond our control and so we develop equanimity. We want there to be peace, happiness, justice, and well-being throughout the world, but it's the nature of human society that there will be a lot of unrest, unhappiness, and injustice. There may be areas where we can make a difference, but for the most part there are a lot of cases that we can't make that much difference, in which case we have to develop equanimity.

This is not just in reference to societies on other sides of the world. Sometimes even in our own lives there are areas where we just can't be of help, either to ourselves or to other people, where we can't make the difference that we'd like to make. You test the boundaries of that area, but when you run up against something you really can't change, that's when you have to be unattached to the results. In other words, the cards are stacked against you, there's really nothing you can do. And it's foolish to keep pushing in an area where you can't make any difference. That's one way.

Another way the principle makes sense is if you regard your own actions in areas where you *are* in charge, where you *can* make a difference, but you either acted in an unskillful way or you acted in a way that can't get the results as quickly as you'd like. In that case, you have to have equanimity about the results, a certain

amount of detachment to admit the mistake if it was a mistake, and to be patient about the results that take time. You want to admit the mistake so you can learn from it.

We don't like to make mistakes. In fact, this seems to be one of our cultural problems: a real difficulty in admitting to mistakes. It may come from having grown up in mass education where admitting to a mistake is a weakness and there was going to be punishment. Or in society in general where the person who admits to mistakes is often seen as being in a position of weakness and will have to pay for it. But in the area of the Dhamma, it doesn't work that way. If you admit your mistakes, that's the beginning of a learning process.

As when you're focusing on the breath right here, right now: If you're focusing in a way that makes the breath constricted, you want to know. And don't just blame it on the breath, saying that breath meditation is not a good method, or placing the blame in other places. You can change the way you focus, you can change the way you breathe, and see what it does for the body.

This gives you a sense of how much you really can change, how much you can learn by being observant. Because it's by being observant, by developing more and more skill in our actions, that we'll finally get to that fourth type of karma the Buddha talked about, the type that takes you beyond ordinary results and leads to the end of karma—the type of karma that leads to liberation. That can be learned only by trial and error. There are lots of instructions in the texts, but a lot more has to be filled in in the course of your own practice, through your own experience.

After all, we're not here to learn about Buddhism, we're here to learn how to overcome our own suffering. And although the general principles may be the same now as they were 2,500 years ago, the particulars are ours and those are the things we have to deal with directly. And it's by learning how to apply the principles to the particulars through trial and error that we learn and develop skill.

So if we make a mistake, we don't childishly refuse to admit the mistake. We have enough detachment, enough objectivity, enough maturity to admit our mistakes so that we can learn from them.

As for the skillful actions that take time, we learn patience. We often talk about meditation as healing treatment for the mind, well, a lot of healing treatments take a lot of time. Meditation is not an instant pill that you pop into your mouth and suddenly have awakening. It's more like an exercise regime that you have to follow for a long time. And so you learn patience. This doesn't mean laziness. It just means that you stick with it and you realize that this is a large project and so you learn how to encourage yourself, how to reason with yourself

when the mind gets impatient: how to give yourself pep talks, how to pay very careful attention to keep yourself interested, learning to look at the meditation in a way that captures your imagination. Because after all, it is your mind, and the complexities of your mind are great. The ins and outs of the committee that you're dealing with here: if you pay careful attention, they can teach you a lot of fascinating lessons.

So it's not that we're facing a dry stretch before we finally get to the oasis. As Ajaan Lee says, there are plants growing along the edge of the path, and if you pay careful attention you'll discover that some of them can be eaten, some of them can be used as medicines. There's a lot to learn.

Or as he points out in another context, the different members of this committee we have here: Some of them may seem obstreperous, some of them may seem difficult, but if you learn how to get them on your side, they can be very useful. The voice that says, "I don't care"—that's an obstacle when it says, "I don't care about the practice, I don't care about the results, I don't care about being happy." But it's very useful when you're dealing with the entanglements that can pull you away from the practice—and you look deep down inside and you realize that there are a lot of things that you don't really care about, that you'd rather not have to deal with. So it's a useful voice for cutting off needless complications. This requires that you learn the politics of your mind and learn how to convert all the various members of the committee to your side.

I was struck when I was first ordained in Thailand, the very first year we had our class of new monks at Wat Asokaram: There were some people who were there obviously not because they wanted to but because their parents had forced them, and the reason the parents had forced them to ordain was that they wanted to get them out of the house. They didn't know what to do with the kids so they foisted them off on the monastery. And they were definitely a problem element. The monk who was elected chairman of our class was a police officer who was taking three months off from his job to ordain. The first thing he did was to make one of the ringleaders of the problem group one of his vice-chairmen. As a result, it defused a lot of the conflicts that might have taken place.

There are a lot of fascinating things to work out here in the course of the practice. Instead of just trying to push through them—to get to our preconceived picture of the goal—learn to work out the details, explore what's going on in your mind. Because where does the meditation lead? It leads right here, deeper and deeper into the mind. And whatever issues the mind throws up at you in the course of the practice, those are the grist for the mill.

So learn how to ferret out which lessons need to be learned, which ones can be put aside as totally irrelevant. And you'll find that patience really does help you get to the goal: the patience that's not attached to having immediate results, that's not attached to having things go the way you want them regardless of how unskillful you are. That's childishness. And it's that childishness that the wisdom of non-attachment to results is meant to cure.

But this non-attachment is not an indifference. You care deeply about doing things right because it's an issue of life and death: true happiness *vs.* an endless round of birth and redeath, rebirth and redeath over and over again. It's an important issue. It's the issue of not wanting to have lived your life in vain.

So many people you read about, so many people you encounter in life, toward the end of life begin to realize that all the work they put into it—a lot of hard, heavy work—got them nowhere. This is probably one of the most crushing things that can happen to you. It adds insult to the injury and the other insults and indignities of old age. Not only is your body turning on you, but when you had it to use you didn't use it properly. The efforts you put into life, the hard work you put in didn't go anywhere at all.

We're practicing here so that we can avoid that. This means, of course, that we really do have to care deeply about the results of our actions, simply that we learn how to do it maturely, in an adult way—in a way that allows us to develop the skills we need in life, not only to cope but to prevail. To find that happiness the Buddha talks about. To see if it really is true, is there a Deathless? That's a question you should really care about. And it should show in the way you act and the way you relate to the results of your actions.