

## Good enough

Ajahn Sucitto

Having lived and practised in the West and being a Westerner myself, I thought an appropriate theme for the evening talk would be practising 'good enough'. This is because the Western mind is so acclimatised to ideals, concepts, and theories; and partly because of the performance driven ethos of our societies. This makes for rapid development in terms of externals and technological advancement, but poor results in terms of the sense of relationship and inner peace. Most of the problems that our societies face are around either a lack of social cohesion or lack of inner self-worth. We don't feel part of a group of shared values, and we lose with a sense of personal value. And we also have a strong performance ethic to compete. There's only one number one: the best team, the best player, the brightest star; the strongest, the fittest, the prettiest, or the wisest. The first guy to a nervous breakdown is a winner. Because that's where it tends to go. There's a lot of driven sense to achieve the excellence. Value is awarded to the great achievers and not as a basic sense of mutual respect for our fellow-humans.

Even on the spiritual plane, we get driven to prove that we're good enough, that we have to achieve some special state in order to be free of the nagging sense of 'not good enough, something wrong with me.' Sure, it's easy to do: the sky's the limit in terms of the ideals of absolute purity, absolute wisdom, refined concentration, Enlightenment and Buddhahood. Compared with those ideals, it's easy to feel that one isn't good enough. Not really pure enough, not committed enough, not concentrated enough, definitely not mindful enough. Not enough *samadhi*. Not enough kindness. Not enough of anything really. Apart from doubt. Plenty of that.

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### Why Nothing is Ever Good Enough

However, there's no way you can grow if your mind is hampered by doubt and negativity. So the point is – without claiming that I'm flawless and don't need to learn or make an effort – how do I get the feeling of inner worth that will support my practice?

First of all, it's helpful to review what the aim of Dhamma practice is.

When the Buddha says make an effort to realise the unrealised – we may assume that this is another performance drive. It depends on how you see that, but the aim of the practice is to release the mind from the suffering and stress. The goal sounds wonderful, and one can get dewy eyed and inspired by that; but the path, how to get there, is the nitty-gritty. And as it's accompanied by wisdom, by deep knowing, it must entail being able to be present with whatever arises in consciousness. What else is there to know? OK, we have, or seem to be, a bodily experience, a thinking experience and a heart or feeling experience. That's all you have, that's what you're walking around with. At least for some of the time – because a lot of the time, the head's somewhere, the body's stumbling after it and the heart's mumbling 'I don't feel so good. There's something wrong, so there must be something wrong with **me**.' But not feeling so good as a state of being is because of this state of being pulled apart: maybe resolving that has to be at least a part of the solution.

Becoming whole and staying connected is a matter of relating to our head, body and heart in a balanced and peaceful way. 'Things are like this now.' Even when we feel sick or bad or confused, if we relate to that experience for what it is, as a condition and not as something that we are – isn't that a way to be at peace; a way that has clarity and freedom? On the other hand, even when things aren't that bad, notice that the tendency is to identify with what's happening and want it to be another way – either to last longer or to change into something else. So rather than relating to experience as it is, we tend to react to it in these get it/ get rid of it ways. And because of that, there's a sense of me having the disagreeable, or being separated from the agreeable; and consequently there are feelings of loss and inadequacy.

Generally, the way it happens is that there's a resistance to feeling uncomfortable through physical pain, embarrassment, grief, fear or uncertainty. So I go out of the heart and into my head. And with that, the agitation of the uncomfortable feeling and the avoidance of it gets translated into 'I've got to do something, I've got to be something.' I have to do something so that other people will give me the message that I'm OK. But I don't know what I have to do, and I can't ask them what I have to do – because that would prove that I'm not OK – so I have to keep busy. And meanwhile the body is struggling along underneath; and awareness of the whole process is shut down or impaired by the agitation. Because of this we're not really aware of where we are, so we have to rush around to get somewhere. A lot of the time that's what people are doing – rushing to get somewhere else and then rushing to get back again. In this rush there's no time to be feeling anything, or enquiring into our actions, because we're too busy. This is pretty normal, isn't it? This is business, this is high performance, this is sport. This is the programming that we are in at this particular time.

Also, we are also attracted to fantasies, movies and video games that aren't happening to real bodies in real time. We don't want to have to be with things as they are; we want action, a buzz, or the sense of getting away from it all – the fantasy glow. What would it be like to be a fairy princess, or a superhero? But then you realise – can your body ever live up to the standard in the fashion magazine? Actually no-one can – the photos are adjusted. You can doll it up for a while but then the discomfort and the sagging and the grubbiness of the body start letting you down. It's just not good enough.

So not feeling good enough is a true experience. Something's wrong. But you don't get good enough through following the idea or the ideal or those performance-driven drives that cause you to fragment. Good enough begins with being whole, with the heart, head and body senses all in the same place. So you enquire: is my body with me now? Is my heart unwilling? Resisting? Or settling into being here? How do I free myself from self-criticism and feeling inadequate? And to look at the topic in another light – where would that self-respect come from? That has to be a relational sense; which is a heart sense, not my thinking mind.

The problem is that we mostly orient through the thinking faculty. And for this faculty absolutes and ideals are easy. You can think of infinity, although it's something that you'll never see, hear, smell, taste or touch. You can think in terms of absolute right and wrong. You can conceive of the perfect person and the perfect society. What you can't conceive of in any clear and definite way is what is good enough. The thinking mind can't grasp that one. And that's why it's important. It's only realizable through the heart faculty. Where there's no guilt, doubt, craving to be something and

conceit, that's good enough. And when that sense is unbroken, that's the undefinable purity that we call Enlightenment. The heart is liberated from that shadow and nagging inner doubt.

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### **Meeting the Howling Dog**

Of course, although we want the pure and the free and the untrammelled, the path to that has to be come through feeling and coming to terms with pieces of ourselves that aren't agreeable or comfortable. The mind isn't always a shining light, is it? Even if you don't act upon them, becoming aware of jealous, moaning, manipulative, greedy or fearful states of mind is uncomfortable. We tend to ignore such moods or bury them under activity or distraction, but as long as they're not dealt with, we're divided internally. So what would it take to become whole and peaceful? Isn't that about relating to how it is right now from a place of compassion and non-identification? Isn't that the faculty that could be developed to a lasting excellence, which would provide us with a good perspective and attitude, yet put an end to spiritual one-upmanship?

Probably every one of us who has practised meditation has experienced the 'howling dog' syndrome. It's like you have something within you that is whining and, hearing it, you think, 'I'll shut that out and get on with the practice.' It's like having a dog howling in the basement, so you close the door and move up to the next floor to get away from all that. But the howling gets louder – maybe it's about the difficult state of your body, or the unresolved feeling you have about somebody you're living with. You think 'These aren't spiritual matters, so cut them out. Move up a level!' So you move up another floor. The howling gets louder. Eventually you get up to the roof, but the howling is still disturbing your peace of mind. And then there's nowhere else to go: you've got to turn around and go all the way down and meet the howling dog and make friends with it.

Quite a bit of our practice is rather like this – coming to terms, meeting one's craving, one's pain, one's grief, one's sense of self, in fact. And of all howling dogs, the daddy of them all is this sense of self. Now when I'm saying 'sense of self', I'm not questioning our existence, but pointing out that what we **sense** as self is always changing and unsatisfactory. The sense of self always has to have something or do something. It wants to be approved of by somebody, or be busy winning at something, or be analysing itself or trying to wipe itself out. It is always orbiting around some need or another. There's the need to know something, or have an opinion; or the need to feel one's doing good enough; the need to feel that one is useful; the need to feel that other people like me. The need to be the same as everyone else. Or the need to be different from everyone else. Or, different on some days, the same on other days. And the need to be able to change from being same to being different when I need to. And so on – it never really settles. It's a busy creature this howling dog.

We try to eliminate it. This is another need. The need to get rid of it. Kick it out. Bust your ego. This sense of self keeps mesmerising our attention, catching us and getting us to react to it. But it's just a series of programs. We get so used to the programs of comparing and analysing and thinking how we could feel better or be better if...that we talk from them and operate around them, and assume these programs are what we are. We can get so involved in the stories and things we didn't do and things we should be doing, or whether we could get some special spiritual experience...that we make the howling dog our master. But then you recognise that no matter how much one feeds this dog, it's still not satisfied. After a while, the realisation may dawn that it doesn't get satisfied.

Now that's not so much a problem as a 'wake up' realisation. Our sense of self is just a series of programs – isn't it good to know that that self is not you! It's the same for everyone; they all have a variation on the same themes. It's just that when the programmable mind is immersed in the scenario of competition and performance and achievement – all of which have no satisfaction in them – it gets programmed into the unsatisfactory. However we can witness these programs and step back from them. The self-programs can be short-circuited by seeing them clearly for what they are and emotionally staying cool and non-reactive to them.

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### **Good enough is about balance**

This is why it's so helpful just to come into the body in the body's own terms. Not the body in terms of any self-other comparisons whereby we can say 'She looks better than me, he's bigger, taller...' but in its own terms. And its bodily terms are what?

When you come into the body, in mindfulness of the body, you feel the sense of being solid – that's the 'earth element'; you feel the sense of warmth, vitality, brightness – that's the 'fire element.' You feel the sense of movement, of pushes and shifts. This is called the 'air element', most often the breath. It's that which pushes the earth element. You also get a sense of everything being cohesive. That is, the arm sensations are connected to the chest sensations – this cohesion is the 'water element'. We all have these. So you come into that. What's there to make of that? Who's got the best earth here?

Well, the best isn't yours or mine; nor is one element better than another. There's no point in trying to have the most earth or be completely earth because you become rigid. If you're just all fire, you get too hot and impulsive. If you're too watery you get no boundaries, you're just indefinite and indecisive. Too much air – you just get pushy and restless. The best is the balance! That is when these elements in our body start to know each other and blend, then they settle into a wholeness – and that's when we start to feel most comfortable. It's not tense. It's not too fiery, but it's not stale. It's flowing but it's definitely got a form to it..

This balance in the body comes through the practice of mindfulness of the body. You can use breathing – not so much a breath, but the rhythmic sense of breathing which travels through the body – to be a guide. Breathing out deep and long and steady you let the body loosen. When you're breathing in, letting the breath move through you, nothing is tight or constricted but the bodily sense feels bright and full. Breathing is the harmonizer, it's called the *kaya-sankhara* or that which governs the body's energy. The aim of it is to arrive at harmony, which means balancing, flowing, embracing, beginning to soften those hard edges in our body, the tightness in our shoulders. It's about taking time to breathe through the painful places in our body, realising that even if your eyebrows are tense, that's going to be a restriction.

This affects the emotions and nervous energy because it's plugged into the same nervous system as the body. Balance in the body put you at ease psychologically. So as we begin to heal the physical or the somatic body, we naturally touch into the emotional or psychological body. This is our relational sense. It's not a particular emotion any more than a sensation is the bodily sense. Nor is it a lack of emotion. Emotions travel through, or get stuck in the emotional body. This emotional body is our

willingness to be affected by, or to be with something. How I am with this feeling. How I am with this thought. Am I alert? Am I frightened? Am I enjoying it? Am I hungry for it? Am I resisting it? At that place where we become aware of a thought, memory, physical feeling, or emotion – what’s happening at that place? And that’s where we develop the heart intelligence through the media of goodwill, compassion, appreciation of what is good, or peaceful, and equanimous acceptance.

It starts with being willing. Being willing is basic goodwill or *metta*. It doesn’t mean dolloping some sentiment onto something. It means that I am willing to be here with this in an open way. That’s the bottom line of it. Sometimes you feel very full. With the painful the goodwill becomes compassion, with the agreeable it is called *mudita* or enjoyment – appreciative joy. It’s like you’re congratulating someone for their success. But you’re not claiming it as your own. And then equanimity is that real emotional balance where the good and the bad – it’s like that. But you’re not claiming that as your self as if ‘I have the most equanimity of anyone I know.’ That immediately substitutes empathy for comparison and conceit that sets up the sense of self and suffering.

With true heart intelligence, we are willing to be with our mind states in an empathic way, but we determine not to add more to its passion and its stories. Empathy then requires a certain detachment: if we get involved with the mood or train of thought, we start to take sides, start to hang on to this and resist that and create a tension between ‘right’ and ‘wrong.’ On the other hand what makes us most whole and balanced, and generates the least suffering is if I don’t hang on to the good stuff I don’t fight with the bad stuff. Because if there’s a hanging onto the good stuff, then a favouring of that, then comes the sense that ‘I am this, I’ve got that.’ So in comes inflation and conceit. Then the balance is lost and ‘crash!’ – the opposite happens – and ‘I’ve blown it.’

Through this development of body and development of heart that our thinking mind begins to sense: there’s not much to do here, these other faculties are keeping things in balance. All I need to do is stay connected. Actually that is a vital part of the process, and we wouldn’t be able to do the previous balancing if there wasn’t the ability to point attention, name what’s going on and assess the experience. These are natural but often misdirected functions of the thinking faculty.

So the thinking mind is there to keep pointing and saying, ‘What’s happening? Are you there? Pause. Wait a while until you really get it.’ It can be used gently and persistently. It has two functions; first there’s *vitakka* – the action of connecting and bringing the mind to the point, and *vicāra* – the assessment, the resonator, which asks ‘How is it?’ That’s how we use our thinking.

This is quite a radical turnaround of our intelligences. And the beauty of it is that we begin to realise that these, just opening up these other forms of intelligence the body intelligence and the heart intelligence – provide this deep sense of balance and groundedness and hereeness and sensitivity, the loss of which has truly not made us feel good enough. But where else are we going to be good enough except in this body, heart and mind?

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### **Good Enough is Good Intention**

Finally being good enough is about not doing things that you can’t feel good about. If you can’t live with integrity, that’s going to cause inner division and self-deception. So good enough is about our ethics and intentions. The Buddha said there were three basic attitudes or motivating principles.

These are; harmlessness, gentleness and simplicity of needs. He would ask himself: 'If my mind is motivated towards harmlessness, is that for my welfare? For other people's welfare? Does lead me to Nibbana and out of suffering?' The answer would be 'Yes.' Then: 'When my mind is motivated towards not getting angry or dismissive or cutting things off; and when my mind is motivated towards simplicity, letting go of what I don't need, and personal modesty – are these for my welfare, for other people's welfare, and do they lead to Nibbana? Yes. Then I'll develop these.'

Harmlessness means turning away from actions that cut off the ethical and empathic sense. So when we commit an act of violence, something in us might say: 'She's the enemy,' or, 'He deserves it.' We cut then off from fellow-feeling. But as we lose that sense of empathy, we cut our own heart in two – because the heart is naturally emphatic. It's the same with gentleness: if dismiss or cut someone off through a lack of compassion, we cut ourselves in two. Finally when we can't be contented and simplify and let go, we depend on external stimulation to keep us happy – and that means getting more. And sooner or later, it means - I'm getting mine, step aside! The sense of modesty and simplicity on the other hand is for our welfare, for everyone's welfare, and leads us to this sense of the mind feeling contented.

Now these attitudes aren't difficult to understand, but the problem is that they are not visited, we're not encouraged to visit them often enough. We forget; we think of getting things done as being more important than being harmless. So it's not that we necessarily sustain an intention of harming others, but we don't prepare the mind to withstand the sudden impulse of violence through body or speech, or even careless casual killing of creatures who are getting in our way. But if you prioritise harmlessness – and accomplish it – then that's really sensational. Imagine if everyone in the world cultivated harmlessness, even for a day! And if you didn't slash somebody with your tongue, chalk that up as a real victory for what is best in humans! And if you didn't even think about harming anyone, then that's even better. These attitudes take to what is beautiful and supportive in humans – and this is the bit that nobody can take away from you. Give yourself the time and space to enjoy it.

So our practice is one of being as conscientious, clear, and honest as we can. We can of course create incredible standards of goodness, but knowing 'good enough' means that you check: am I doing what I feel I can do within my capacity to do good? Am I doing something that's deliberately nasty, stupid, and poisonous or not? Is my energy going into violating others or not, trashing other people or not? Trashing myself or not? This is not appropriate behaviour. What is it that wants to do that? That wants to criticise and continually castigate ourselves and hang on to guilty perceptions of things we did fifteen years ago? What is it that wants to do that? That's harming us, that's never going to lead to 'good enough.'

But when we have done wrong, there's a need to learn from that and heal what that has done to our hearts. To feel the sadness or the pain of the things we've done wrong, to feel it and be with it and then to let it go. This is what meditation is about. It is a time for this kind of healing and unifying. So we can sit and rest in what's good enough.

Perhaps this Dhamma talk hasn't been the best. But maybe it's been good enough for now.