

## *The Stairway Up*

*April 28, 2004*

Once, soon after I had first met Ajaan Fuang, I had a dream. In the dream I was visiting Ajaan Lee's monastery. I had never been there, but in the dream they had a big museum several stories high. I had the choice to climb the stairway or to climb a ladder up on the side of the building, going straight to the top floor, and I chose the ladder. I wanted to go straight up to the top. But as I was climbing, the ladder fell down. Fortunately I was caught. The problem was that the ladder wasn't leaning against anything solid. At the end of the dream I found myself at the door again, having to contemplate going up the stairway. That's when I woke up.

And that's pretty much a story of how my practice started: A lot of things happened very quickly those first couple of weeks with Ajaan Fuang but then they all unraveled, and I had to start back at the beginning, step by step by step. This can sometimes be discouraging. It happens to all meditators. Sometimes by fluke we happen to hit something very advanced—or at least it seems to be very advanced—in the meditation and then it all unravels right before our eyes. At first it can be encouraging, but ultimately it turns discouraging as we see the defilements we're still living with in our minds—that those quick, flashy experiences didn't actually make much of an impact.

The follow-up work seems a lot less glamorous, and a lot of people give up right there. But it's important that you don't give up and that you don't look down on the situation where you are. Don't get discouraged, because wherever you go, those are the issues you have to deal with, that's the situation you have to address. If you don't deal with it now, you have to come back to that same situation all over again, and sometimes it gets worse. So the proper attitude is that whatever issues arise in the meditation, those are the ones you have to deal with. Don't compare them with where you've been before in the meditation, or with the issues you'd like to be dealing with now, or where you want the meditation to go.

Most of us would like to be magically beamed up to a higher level of concentration or a higher level of insight. But it's often the case that our refusal to look at the situation in our minds right now is what's preventing concentration and insight from arising. So look at what you've got. Look at where you are. Don't pass judgment as to whether the problem you're facing is elementary or

advanced. It's the problem you're facing. It's the problem that has to be dealt with. Bring all your powers of attention to bear right there.

And be glad that you've got the opportunity to practice. Don't view it as drudgery. A lot of people are in situations where they have no inclination, have no idea what the practice is about. Or they may have an idea and the inclination but they don't have the opportunity. Here we have the opportunity. We've got the inclination. We have some idea of what the problem is all about. These opportunities are rare to find.

So the teaching on acceptance means accepting where you are. It doesn't mean that you accept that you're going to *stay* there forever. You simply accept that this is the situation you're facing right now. Whether it's something you like or not, whether you find yourself attracted to it or not, that's not the issue. The issue is: Are you willing to work with what you've got?

That willingness is an important element in all levels of practice. It starts with our willingness to help other people, and goes on with our willingness to practice the precepts. This volunteer spirit is an important part of training the mind. That's what it's all about: realizing that you've got to put energy into it if you're going to get anything out of it. When you're willing to take that first step, make that first gift of your energy, that's where the practice starts to grow. Without that attitude, it doesn't go anywhere. All we can think of is what we'd like to get out of the meditation, but before you can *get* anything you have to *give*.

As for generosity, sometimes people look at what they've got and they'd like to be able to give much more. They'd like to make a more impressive offering, but their means are limited. So they have to content themselves with giving limited gifts to begin with, but the momentum builds on that.

Sometimes the little gifts bring the greatest reward. Ajaan Fuang liked to tell the story of a man and his wife who had only one upper cloth between them. They each had a cloth to cover the lower parts of their bodies, but only one cloth between them to cover the upper parts of their bodies. That was back in the days in India when you didn't go out of your house unless you had two pieces of cloth around you: one wrapped around your waist, the other over your shoulders. Because they only had one upper cloth between them, they'd have to leave the house at separate times. If one was going out, the other had to stay at home. They were that poor.

One night they heard that the Buddha was going to be giving a talk, so they agreed that the husband should be the one to go. The talk was basically on the rewards of generosity. The husband kept sitting there thinking, "This is why I'm so poor. I haven't been generous. What have I got to give? Nothing. All I have is this one cloth, and if I give this I won't be able to go anywhere. But if I don't give this, what can I give? I won't be able to give anything at all." So he battled back

and forth, back and forth, back and forth in his mind for hours, and the Buddha, noting what was going on, just kept on talking and talking on generosity. It was originally supposed to be a short Dhamma talk, but it went on and on and on until midnight. The king was in the audience, lots of people were in the audience, and they were wondering why the Dhamma talk was going on for so long.

Finally around midnight the man stood up shouting, "Victory! Victory!" He had overcome his stinginess. He was going to give the cloth to the Buddha, so he went down and gave the cloth. People in the audience wondered who this was, and why he was shouting "Victory." When they learned of his poverty, they were very impressed. The king said, "Okay, I'll give him another cloth and other things in addition" — a cloth and a horse and an elephant, all kinds of stuff. One of each.

And because the man was on a roll, a generosity roll, he gave all those things to the Buddha, too. So the king upped the ante—gave him two of each. The man gave all of that. The king kept doubling: four, eight, finally sixteen. At that point the man decided to keep eight of each of these things—eight pieces of gold, eight pieces of silver, eight pieces of cloth, eight horses, eight elephants. He gave the other eight to the Buddha and went home with his remaining eight. The lesson of the story is that a small gift by a person of little means translates into a lot more in terms of its rewards than a large gift from someone of large means, because the first gift requires more of a sacrifice.

The same principle applies in the meditation. When things aren't going well, you have to make a sacrifice of your pride, a sacrifice of your likes and dislikes, and get down to dealing with what's actually happening in the mind. Only when you're able to make that sacrifice can the rewards come. In the beginning they may not be all that impressive. You may not get a piece of gold, a piece of silver, an elephant or whatever, but you do make a step, you see a slight change in the mind. That's much better than just sitting around being discouraged.

So whatever the issues you're facing in your meditation, be content to deal with them, because those are the real issues, the genuine issues you've got to face. They may not stack up against the things you've read about or the things you've experienced in the past, but a little solid progress is much more valuable than all the quick and flashy special effects out there in the world.

Ajaan Fuang sometimes had students who would come to sit and meditate with him for the first time and gain visions of their past lives or of heavenly beings. Some of his older students felt jealous and discouraged by that. Here they'd been sitting and meditating for months with nothing special happening, and this person comes in and has all kinds of interesting things going on all at once. It often happened, though, that the quick and flashy students didn't last very long. When the visions stopped, when there was no more entertainment,

they left. It's the steady progress that makes all the difference, that turns out to be the winner in the end.

So sacrifice whatever attitudes get in the way of looking at the issues staring you right in the face, because those are the genuine article. They're right here. They're not abstractions. We can sit around and think about Dhamma abstractions from dawn to dusk and dusk to dawn, but the problems in the mind aren't composed of abstractions. They're not composed of memories. They're composed of movements in the mind right now. Look at what the mind is doing, how it moves. Can you change the way it moves?

You've got to poke around in what's actually going on in your mind to see which parts of the present are made of elastic and which parts are made of steel—in other words, the things you can change and the things you can't. There will be drudgery and there will be mistakes, but these are the things you learn from. This is the kind of knowledge that really makes a difference in the mind, because this is how you develop your sensitivity, how you get a sense of how to balance excessive desire with lack of desire, how to balance excessive effort with lack of effort, and all the other balancing acts that need to be done in the meditation. You learn from falling down and picking yourself up again. And you do this not by thinking about the ideal of balance, but by gaining an intuitive feel for it by poking at this, poking at that, leaning this way, leaning that. Whatever the attitude that's coming up in the mind—the discouragement, the frustration, the irritation, whatever—you poke at it. You don't necessarily have to believe it.

And whatever positive attitudes come up in the mind, no matter how small they might seem, those are what you've got to work with. After all, redwood trees come from tiny seeds. If you step on them, they never have a chance to grow. But if you look at them carefully, you can recognize them, you can see that they're different from weed seeds. That gives you an idea of what you've got to encourage and what you've got to discourage in the mind, what you've got to cultivate and what you've got to cut out, uproot.

So gardening like this may not be glamorous work and it may not be flashy, but this is how all genuine work is done in this world. This is how things come to blossom. You poke around bit by bit by bit, paying careful attention, making mistakes and learning from them. That's the sort of work that gets solid results, results that build on a good solid foundation, where you take the stairway and it does ultimately get you up to the top floor—with no danger of crashing down.