

Cleanliness is Next to Mindfulness

February 10, 2006

There's a famous poem in Thailand about the amorous adventures of two men trying to outdo each other in terms of the number of women they can sleep with. It's pretty light entertainment, but one of its most interesting passages is when one of the men is entering the apartments of a woman he's enamored with. He opens the door and there's a folding screen painted with a story. At that point the poem drops the story of the man and the woman, and goes into the story on the screen, describing not only the events depicted on the screen but also *how* they're depicted. It turns out the woman herself had painted the screen. So as the man goes from panel to panel, he not only learns the story but also gets a very good sense of what kind of person she is by the way she handled the scenes, how she painted the characters. So even though you haven't met her yet in the poem, by the time you finish the story in the screen you know her through her handiwork.

This is a principle you find throughout Thai culture. Back in the old days, people would learn about each other by the way they did things, by the things they made. If you were a young man and wanted to appeal to a young woman, you'd carve a pole for her to carry over her shoulder when carrying gifts to the monastery. And she'd get a very good sense of what kind of person you were both by the fact that you made a pole for that purpose, and by your handiwork in the way you carved it. Most of us nowadays would be hopeless in a situation like that. We're not used to making things.

This is one of our problems as meditators. We don't have many physical skills; we haven't learned the mental qualities that go with developing a physical skill. So we've got to go back and learn them from scratch. This is why the training is not just a matter of sitting and walking; it's a whole lifetime. All the things you do throughout the day are opportunities to develop mindfulness, alertness, learning how to be meticulous in what you do. There's the saying, "How you do anything is how you do everything." It may not be absolutely true, but it's close.

Ajaan Lee devotes almost a whole Dhamma talk to the topic of cleanliness. The title of the talk is "Reflection on Virtue," or "Recollection of Virtue," but a good two-thirds of the talk is about being clean. That's an important part of virtue. In other words, while you're living here, don't think that the day-to-day facts of eating or having a place to sleep are minor matters to hurry through so

you can get to the real business of meditating. If you're sloppy with things outside, you're going to be sloppy with your meditation. It's a basic principle. You want to learn how to be meticulous, clean, neat, alert in all the things you do. In that way, the activities become not a chore to be disposed of as quickly as possible, or something just getting in the way of your meditation. They become part of the meditation. After all the word for meditation is *bhavana*: It means "to develop." You're developing qualities of mind. And the mind that cleans your room is the same mind that tries to clean itself out. If it's sloppy in cleaning the room, it's going to be sloppy in cleaning itself out. So you've got to take these things seriously.

I remember Ajaan Fuang telling me about his time with Ajaan Mun, how Ajaan Mun was extremely meticulous, very clean about everything. Even living out in the forest in the dry season when there was a lot of dust, his hut and everything around it was very neat, very clean. Everything was in its right place. Even the rags he used to wipe off his feet: He always kept them well washed. If they got torn, he would sew them up. He didn't let anything go to waste.

So try to have this attitude in all your activities. When you're training the mind, the mind is there not only when you meditate. It's the same mind that goes through the day: what you do, what you say, how you do your chores. Those are the areas where you show the qualities of your mind. Those are the areas where they're also being developed. If you're developing sloppy, lazy habits in your day-to-day chores, those habits are going to get in the way of your meditation. If you learn to be meticulous and neat, those habits will come help your meditation—because the mind is like a large tree. Some trees—like banana trees—have only one shoot at the end. They grow very fast but don't give much shade. The trees that give a lot of shade are the ones that grow lots of branches.

There's a lot to be covered in training the mind. It's not just a matter of mastering one single technique. I was once asked the question, "How does someone who's mastered meditation overcome the problem of pride?" After all, you've been able to master this technique; you're pretty sharp. Well, that happens mainly in places where everything is reduced to *a* meditation technique, in meditation centers where the people who meditate don't have anything else to do. Everything gets channeled into that one shoot at the end of the banana tree. Things may happen fast, but there's no shade. It's an incomplete training.

The complete training has to go all around. It has to deal with the way you treat other people, how you handle difficult situations. Your whole life is part of the training, and in the course of the whole-life aspect of the training, you need to learn how to see how you've been sloppy, how you've been stupid, how you've been ignorant, how you've been thoughtless and careless. If you don't see those things, you're not going to learn anything. The experience is chastening

instead of pride-inducing. When the training is complete, every aspect of the mind has been trained, so that you're skilled at all kinds of activities, with an attitude nicely balanced between humility and pride.

Once, during my very first year with Ajaan Fuang, the time came for the *kathina*, which was the big event of the year. Lots of people were going to come from Bangkok. Some of them would have to be housed for a night or two before the *kathina*, and everybody would have to be fed. I had a dream a few nights before they came that Ajaan Fuang had a huge closet with lots of different hats. He would go into the closet and come out with one hat on, then go back in and come out with a different hat on. And sure enough, in the preparation for the *kathina*, they had to put up bamboo sheds and they had to arrange for the extra kitchen areas—lots of different tasks—and he was good at supervising them all. As later he told me, “Practicing the Dhamma is not just being good at sitting with your eyes closed. It involves learning how to be skillful in everything you do.” This attitude that wants to be skillful: That's what's going to see you through lots of different problems. If you don't give a damn about things outside, your mind is going to be a “don't-give-a-damn” kind of mind inside as well. It gets apathetic, careless.

But if you make up your mind that whatever chore falls to you, you're going to try to do it skillfully, then you develop what are called the four bases for success: the desire to do it skillfully; the persistence that sticks with it till you've mastered it; intentness, paying a lot of attention to what you're doing; and analysis, using your powers of discernment to see what's not yet right, trying to figure out how to get around problems, how to solve them. This fourth factor also involves ingenuity—all the active qualities of the mind. The texts talk about these four bases of success specifically in conjunction with concentration, but a common teaching all over Thailand is that if you want to succeed at anything, you've got to develop these qualities of mind and apply them to whatever you have to do to succeed. And regardless of what areas of your life you develop them in, you can take them and apply them to other areas of your life as well.

So see every aspect of your life as an opportunity to train the mind. If you want to develop good strong powers of concentration, it's not just what you do while you're sitting with your eyes closed. It's how you tackle any activity: learning how to be focused on that activity, learning to be strict with the mind when it starts wandering off. That way the mind is right there; you learn how to keep it right there no matter what you're doing. And when the time comes to sit down with your eyes closed, well, you're right there. You don't have to go chasing the mind down. So try to see the practice as a seamless whole. The word *bhavana*, as I said, is “to develop.” You can develop your mind in any situation.

Don't think that the important insights are going to come only when you're sitting with your eyes closed. There are many references to this point in the Canon. One nun's mind finally came to a good solid concentration while she was washing her feet. And the poem in which she tells of how this happened is interesting. After she washes her feet, she goes into her hut and does all the things you're told to do in the Vinaya. She checks the bed first before she sits down on it and then she takes a pin and pulls the wick out of the lamp to put out the light. And as soon as the fire went out, she said, that was the moment of her Awakening. She said the liberation of awareness was like the liberation of the fire.

So it's not only when you're sitting with your eyes closed that important things can occur to the mind, important insights can come, or that the mind can gather into one. It's amazing. Sometimes the mind can really get concentrated while you're just doing a chore if you approach the chore with the proper respect. So remember that this tree of ours has lots of branches and they're all growing at once. Things may seem slow because they're all growing at once, but at least you're getting a tree that offers really good shade once it's grown. That's what it means for the mind to be well-trained: trained all-around. You can watch the mind in its activities, so you want to make sure that it's well trained in everything it does.