

An Anthropologist from Mars

May 28, 2008

Years back, I taught a course on the forest tradition at a Buddhist study center. The first evening of the course, after making some general remarks, I gave the people attending the course their first assignment: to go back to their rooms and clean them up, arranging everything very neatly. That's where a lot of the training in the forest begins. Wherever you go, you try to be neat. What this teaches you, in a very concrete way, is to be intent on what you do, to try to pare down your activities so that the few activities you do, you do carefully, heedfully, with circumspection. This is a good habit to develop as a meditator regardless of whether you're a monk or a layperson.

As the Buddha said, this is one of the things to be done by one who is skilled in aims: be a person of few activities. This doesn't mean being lazy. It means deciding what's really important in life and focusing your energies there. As for the things that fritter away your time, just drop them. That simplifies life a lot. It's the old-fashioned way of simplifying things. The modern ways of simplifying things, of course, is to buy a magazine that tells you what to buy to simplify your life. But the Buddha's way is the old way: to see which activities you're engaged in that get the mind stirred up, and learn how to abandon them. And "activities" here means everything from the way you look at things, the way you listen to things, to the actual responsibilities you take on.

The bottom line for a meditator, when doing any of these things, is to ask yourself: How does this affect the state of your mind? This is very different from the bottom line in the rest of the world. There, if you're a layperson, you have to pay attention to how much money and how many people you need to survive in physical comfort. But when you start practicing, the question is: How much do you really need for mental comfort, for the mind to find the happiness that comes from peace and tranquility? If you're engaged in work that takes up a lot of your time and energy, then even though it may provide a comfortable income, it's really not conducive to the practice. You want to find a job that you like, that you enjoy doing, so that it's not pure drudgery, but that also gives you time to practice, energy to practice, so your time isn't frittered away, frittered away.

This last weekend I was with an old friend from college, and it was sad to see how much of his life was taken up by his job. Like so many people, his question was: How much longer did he have to work so that he could finally afford to retire and then really do what he wanted to do? And you always wonder: Will the person survive to retirement? That's a scary thought. You save up and save up, but then you don't live to enjoy what you've saved. In the meantime your time is wasted—maybe not totally wasted, but you don't get as much out of it as you could have.

What this means is that, as a meditator, you don't just take the meditation and squeeze it into the cracks of your life as it is. You've got to ask yourself: How can I live my life in such a way that it will be more conducive to the practice, to give more space to the meditation?—so that the meditation, the state of your mind, can become the bottom line.

This requires that you take a skeptical look at the things that society at large views as important. As the Buddha said, basically what the world has to offer is just eight things: material gain, material loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, and pain. That's it. That's what the world has to offer. And as you notice, those things come in pairs. You don't get the good side without the bad side. They trade places back and forth. If you make your happiness depend on things like this, you're setting yourself up for a fall. And yet we let these things—especially issues of status and praise—really pull us in.

So you've got to learn how to look at them with a jaundiced eye. Think about the dangers that come from having a high status, having the respect of other people, because in many cases their respect is really not worth that much. They respect you because they want to get something out of you. You have to work on seeing through that. Approach society at large as an anthropologist would. Think of yourself as coming down from the planet Mars as an anthropologist who wants to see how these strange earthlings think, how they behave, so that they don't snare you with their values. And you don't snare yourself with their values.

If you can maintain this attitude, you can cut through a lot of garbage. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, nobody paid you to be born; you're not here dependent on anybody else's approval. You're here because you want to find true happiness. Whether other people approve or not, that's their business. When you think in this way, you can start making choices that really are in your true best interest without getting snagged on whether other people approve, whether it looks strange in their eyes, or you *think* it might look strange in their eyes. When you can cut through these eight ways of the world, you find that a lot of the obstacles to practice get cleared out of the way.

So it helps to see both gain and loss as having good and bad sides. When there's material loss, you find out who your true friends are. When you lose status, as Ajaan Lee says, if they call you a dog, well, dogs don't have any laws. They can go wherever they like and do whatever they want to do. When people criticize you, it gives you a chance to reflect on yourself: Is what they say true? If it is, you've learned something important about yourself. If it's not, then you've learned something important about *them*. As for pain, we all know that the Buddha said that pain, suffering, stress—however you translate *dukkha*—is a noble truth. There's a lot to be learned there.

So try to face the ways of the world with equanimity and not let yourself get sucked into the narratives or systems of values that people use to tie you in, to keep you going along with their view of the world. After all, they want to make sure that everyone around them shares the same values so that they can feel comfortable, so they don't have to face the huge abyss inside their hearts, the huge emptiness, the huge void, when those values are exposed for what they are. And their way of avoiding that is to rest assured that everybody else believes the way they do, thinks the way they do, and acts the way they do. But you're not performing them any service by playing along. They may not like it if you don't play along, but they have to learn to accept that. Maybe they can learn from it. If they don't learn from it, well, you can't force them to learn. But you can't allow their attitudes to run your life.

This is a huge area: your reaction to other people's praise and criticism, the respect or lack of respect they give you. It's so important that, as the Buddha

said, one of the signs of a person who's reached nibbana is that he or she doesn't reverberate in response to criticism. He compares the awakened mind to a gong that's been cracked. You hit the gong and there's no sound. Or there may be little plunk, but it doesn't reverberate, doesn't continue ringing. The ability to train your mind so that it doesn't keep ringing with the words of other people: That's a really essential part of the practice.

A lot of societies have rites of passage where a person approaching adulthood is sent out to be alone. For many people it's the first time in their lives they've ever really been by themselves. It gives them a chance to gain a sense of who they are and what they really think about things, what they feel inspired to do with their lives. In our society we lack that. It may be why most people never really grow up. So try to make the meditation your rite of passage: the time when you're alone and can sort things out, from a mature position, as to what you really believe in and what you don't.

The first year when I went back to Thailand to ordain, I was sorting through a lot of attitudes and ideas I had picked up from who-knows-where all through the years of my life. I was far enough away and had enough time for myself so that I could really look at these things and decide what I really believed in, what I didn't. And meditation gives you a good place to stand so you can watch these things without getting caught up in them. When you're meditating, *all* thoughts are suspect until they show they can help you with staying with the breath or understanding what's going on in the mind. Only then do you admit them into the meditation. But everything else gets called into question. And this is a useful attitude to maintain even when you're not meditating. The press of society makes it difficult, but if you're really serious about your true happiness, you've got to press back, to develop the ability to question things that you've believed for a long time. If you simply stay with other people who share similar attitudes, that tends to reinforce old ideas, reinforce old values. So you've got to be doubly careful about that.

And when you decide that you don't agree with society's values, learn to do it in a way that's not confrontational. After all, you're going your own way. You're not a permanent earthling. You're not here to settle down for good. You're here primarily to practice, to train your mind. If, having trained your mind, you can help other people, that's fine. But if you can't, make sure that at least you get your own mind in shape. As Ajaan Suwat used to say, whether we get other people to come here doesn't matter, as long as we get ourselves: i.e., that we train ourselves and get results from the training. That's what matters.

So learn to foster a little space of separation between you and the values of society at large. Ajaan Mun was often criticized for not following the old Thai monastic customs, old Laotian monastic customs. People said, "Why aren't you doing it the Thai way? Why aren't you doing it the Lao way? What is it with these *dhutanga* practices you're following? It's just not the way other people do things." And he replied, "Well, the ways the Thais do things, the ways the Laos do things, are all the customs of people with defilements." This point applies to the customs of every society in the world, Asian or not. He was more interested in the customs of the noble ones, to delight in developing, to delight in abandoning: i.e., to delight in developing skillful qualities and to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities. That attitude right there flies right in the face of most of human society. But if you can hold to it, it gives you space, it gives you

the proper orientation so that, as you go through life and learn to be more self-reliant in your meditation, you really do have your own compass. And you can make sure that it always points due North.