

# *Against Your Type*

June 22, 2008

There's a passage in *The Craft of the Heart*, which is one of Ajaan Lee's first books, where he talks about six different personality types—in Thai the word is *carit*; in Pali, *carita*. There's the passion type, the aversion type, the delusion type, the intellectual type, the gullible type, and the worrying type. In listing these types, Ajaan Lee is obviously uncomfortable with them. He treats them because they were in the standard Dhamma textbooks that had been disseminated all over Thailand by that time, and which in turn were based on the commentaries. In fact, one of his reasons for writing *The Craft of the Heart* was to take a lot of the teachings from the Dhamma textbooks and treat them from the point of view of the forest tradition.

So because these concepts were in the books, he had to treat them. He talks about them, and about the idea—again from the commentaries—that each has a particular type of meditation suitable for it. But then, at the very end of the discussion, he erases the distinctions. He says that, actually, all of us have all of these tendencies. It's not that people are types. We may have certain tendencies, certain habits that we develop over time, but we each have the full range of defilements. So we all need to have a full repertoire of techniques, a repertoire of skills, for dealing with them.

This principle applies to meditation, and it applies to daily life as well, because we have the tendency to type ourselves. And either we like the type or we don't. If you like the type, you just say, "Well, I'm the person I am and you have to accept it, that's the way it is, that's the way I'm always going to be." As for the people who don't like the type they've assigned themselves, they say, "Well, maybe I'm too assertive all the time, maybe I should be less assertive," or "Maybe I'm not assertive enough and I should learn to be more assertive all the time."

All of this misses an important part of the teaching, which is that instead of looking at things in terms of the sort of person you are, you want to look at each situation and ask, "What's the appropriate action to do right now, in these particular circumstances?" Again, this applies both in the meditation and in your practice outside of the meditation, where you practice in dealing with other people. You don't want to wake up in the morning and say, "I should be more assertive," and then go through the day just being more assertive willy-nilly. You need to read the situation: In which types of situations and with which sorts of people do you need to be more assertive, in which do you need to be *less* assertive, and how you can do it skillfully?

I don't know how many warriors I've run into, people who just want to pick up a cause and fight no matter what; who haven't realized that the first principle of being a warrior is learning to choose your battles, realizing that some battles are just not worth fighting so that you don't waste your time and energy on unimportant issues, and can give all your strength to the important ones. In other words, you want to be able to play lots of different roles, whichever role is appropriate for this particular set of circumstances, this particular defilement of

the mind, or this particular situation outside. There's a skill to bowing out, just as there's a skill to fighting. Learn to develop a full range of skills. Instead of looking at yourself as a type of personality, see the issue more as a question of what range of skills you have, where your skills have not yet developed, and where they need more work. Because the fact that you've learned to be, say, unassertive in particular situations may be due to the fact it was the appropriate thing to do in those situations. So you don't want to drop that ability entirely. Just learn that there are other situations where you have to be more assertive. Or if you tend to have kind of a rough and ready personality, realize that there are times when it's better to be a little bit more refined, a little bit more restrained.

So instead of acting out of the force of habit, you want to look at the situation outside and apply this approach. There are two reasons for this. The first is that the habits you develop outside are going to apply to your meditation. The second is that, whether we like it or not, as Buddhists in the land of wrong view we often stand for Buddhism in our actions. Whether people know we're Buddhist is not the issue. Someday they'll find out, and they'll ask, "Oh, is that how Buddhists act?" You don't want them to ask that question with that scathing tone of voice. You want them to say, "Oh, Buddhists tend to act in very appropriate ways." That's the impression you want to give because it helps them.

And it's part of your training too. As you get more sensitive to situations outside and learn that you can approach them with an expanded set of skills, you start applying the same principle inside as well. Sometimes as you're meditating and things get dry, it might be wise to drop the breath for a little while and think of a topic that gives you a little more joy, a little more inspiration in the practice. Sometimes thinking thoughts of goodwill can help provide that sense of inspiration. Or you can recollect the Buddha and what a wonderful teacher he was. Here was someone who, after his awakening, had no need for anything from anybody, and yet he spent 45 years walking all over Northern India to teach anyone who was ready to be taught. And he taught not because he wanted fame or recognition or approval from people. He taught because he had something good to share. It's really hard to find a teacher like that. The fact we have that kind of teacher is something we should take joy in. There's nothing in the Dhamma designed to rake money our way, or to appeal to the defilements of the teacher. It's all straightforward truth, all straightforward beneficial teaching. As the Buddha said, things he would teach were, one, true; two, beneficial; and three, timely. So even though he's not here where we can see him in action, to see which teaching he would pull out for any particular situation, we can still apply his standards to learn from our own efforts.

So if you find recollection of the Buddha inspiring, use it when you need it. Other times, when the mind is getting a little bit too carried away with itself—you've probably heard that there are times when desire can be part of the path, and you say, okay, any desire must be okay; well, that's going beyond bounds—you've got to learn how to rein yourself in, exercise more restraint.

In the teachings on breath meditation, the Buddha talks about times when the mind needs gladdening, in other words, you need to give it more energy. There are times when it needs steadying, and this can include giving it more restraint, making it more solid, more still, more circumspect. And then times when it needs releasing, when you find yourself burdening yourself down with unnecessary

worries, unnecessary cares: Learn how to drop them, release yourself from those burdens.

So it comes down to learning how to watch your mind and see what needs to be done, realizing that sometimes the amount of energy you need to apply to a problem is not the sort of level you normally apply. There are some people who really like to take a macho approach that whatever defilement comes up in the mind they're going to starve it. They go without food, they work themselves really hard, thinking that somehow the austerity is going to burn the defilement away. And that does work with some problems. That can be one tool you use, one tool that you keep in your tool chest, but it can't be the only tool. There are other defilements that require more precision, less brute effort, but demand a lot more from your powers of observation, so that you can understand where they're coming from.

You want to have a wide range of skills. Instead of thinking of yourself as a particular sort of person who has to behave in a certain way, or is miserable with the way he innately is, just look at things in terms of your range of skills to see where they need expanding. You've got to develop other skills as well, which may seem less in character. But you're not here to stay in character. You're here to expand your character, expand your range of skills. Because that's a lot of why we suffer in life: We don't have a full range of skills for dealing effectively with greed, anger, and delusion; for dealing effectively with difficult people; for dealing effectively with friendly people; for dealing effectively with the mind when it's down; for dealing effectively with the mind when it's up.

Instead of simply acting out of force of habit, or deciding to change your habits in a very general way, you want to develop specific skills for specific situations. Learn how to read a situation and get a sense of what's needed. As you develop your powers of observation in this way, you benefit in lots of ways—and the people around you benefit too. Your actions are more appropriate, and you're not tied to the force of habit. In this way, defilements that were recalcitrant become a lot easier to deal with—because they have their skills too, you know. If you apply only one approach to them, they'll know you. They'll see you coming from three miles down the road because you telegraph your moves. They have their tricks, so you need to have your tricks, too. There are times when they'll respond to harsh treatment, other times they'll respond only if you treat them very gently.

So don't let yourself be limited by your sense of who you are. Know your range of skills and see where you need more practice. But think of it as that: a range of skills. You need more skills to deal with more situations. The question of who you are just gets put to the side because ultimately it's really irrelevant. The Buddha's teachings focus primarily not on types of people but on types of actions: the types of action that gives rise to suffering, the types of action that can put an end to suffering. Dependent co-arising, the four noble truths, emptiness: All the really big basic teachings are questions of action and result. That's how the Buddha wants us to look at things. That's what right view is all about: seeing things in terms of actions and their results. Then you take that insight and use it to develop all the skills you need, as wide a range of skills as possible.

When I first met Ajaan Fuang, I had a dream. I looked in his closet and saw

that it was filled with all kinds of hats, each for a different role. He had a cowboy hat, a baker's hat, all kinds of hats in his closet. Then as I got to know him in real life, I realized that that's the sort of person he was: He had lots of different skills and could play lots of different roles. You could never really predict what his reaction would be at a particular time. You could depend on it in the sense that he would try to act in the most skillful way possible given a particular situation, but sometimes his sense of skillful was hard to predict.

That's an aspect of right view that we tend to overlook but it's really important. Work on your range of skills, work on your range of strategies. Because the defilements have their skills, they have their strategies. And if you establish yourself as a particular type of person, you're an easy mark for them. The wider the range of skills you have, the harder it is for the defilements to catch you.