

Barriers in the Heart

March 26, 2004

A lot of our suffering and stress come from the limitations we feel in our lives. We've got this body that needs constant care, and even though we care for it, what does it do? It starts getting old, it gets ill, it finally dies, no matter how well we care for it. And it doesn't ask permission before it does any of these things. It doesn't give any warning. Then there are financial limitations, social limitations. You look around and it seems like we're getting hemmed in all the time.

I had a dream once in which I died, and the experience of death was like the world just closing in, closing in, closing in, until I had no room to stay anywhere and I had to get out. That's the way life is: It just keeps closing in, closing in – all these limitations coming from outside. And not just outside limitations: The really constraining limitations are the ones in our own minds, the ones we create for ourselves.

The good news here is that we can learn not to create them. We can learn to take down these barriers. In fact, the whole practice is one of taking down barriers, taking down limitations, even from the very beginning, the very basic levels.

Dana, or generosity: being willing to give of yourself, give of your time, give of your energy. So often the word "dana" gets hijacked for fundraising, and we think that it's mainly an issue of giving money. But it's more a giving of yourself. As you give of yourself, you get a lot in return. Ajaan Lee would say – in a typical Thai idiom – that you build goodness within yourself. And that goodness is something like yeast. It begins to expand. It breaks through barriers.

The giving of a gift is the overcoming of a barrier between people, but more importantly a barrier in your own mind: your selfishness, your tendency to say, "I can only give this much, and the rest I want to hold back." The Thais have a phrase for the quality that comes from generosity. It can literally be translated as "heart water" or "heart juice." *Naam jai*. That's what generosity does. It moistens a heart that's been dry, so that it starts to grow.

The same with the precepts. You're overcoming barriers in your attitudes toward what you can do, how scrupulous you can be in your behavior. This last weekend we were talking about the precepts, and getting down to a lot of the nitty-gritty about how you deal with ants in your house. There's one person in the group who, every time this issue comes up, complains that it's getting too picayune, talking about ants. But the whole purpose of the precepts is that you want to learn to be more and more scrupulous in how you act, how you speak,

how you think. The ants will benefit, and so will you. Treat your actions as skills. As with any skill ... Say you're making furniture. You want a fine finish on the furniture. You want a snug fit between the pieces of wood. And that comes from being scrupulous, *very* precise. As you learn to take the same attitude toward your life, it requires putting more energy into what you're doing so that you do it really well, in a way that's not harming anybody at all. The emphasis here is on what you put in, what you give, and in so doing you find yourself creating fewer and fewer barriers for yourself.

When you break the precepts, you're placing barriers on your life. Suppose you tell a lie. That lie then becomes something you have to carry around with you. You have to remember who you told the lie to and what the lie was. The results of that lie come to haunt you, come to place barriers on you. Whereas with the precept to tell the truth, as with all the precepts, you find you're placing fewer and fewer barriers on yourself. All you have to do is remember the truth. The world opens up. It's a much more secure place. Because you've been giving unlimited security to other people, you have a share in that unlimited security as well.

But then as you meditate, the first things you run into are more subtle barriers, literally called, "hindrances," "obstacles." And again, they're self-created, self-imposed. Sensual desire the Buddha compares to debt. Ill will he compares to a sickness or an illness. Sloth and torpor he compares to a prison. Restlessness and anxiety he compares to slavery. Uncertainty he compares to traveling across a barren, dangerous landscape.

These are all barriers that we create in our minds, so it's good to have antidotes to overcome them. One of the series of antidotes is what they call the ten recollections. These are helpful in providing an expansive sense of heart that can help overcome its limitations. Because what the limitations basically come from is this: We want to get pleasure and then that desire is thwarted. So we respond with anger or boredom or restlessness and anxiety or with uncertainty. To get beyond the limitations of these reactions, we've got to look at that "getting" attitude and remind ourselves of the giving attitude that's been nourishing our hearts all along.

This is why one of the recollections is recollection of your own generosity, recollection of your own virtue – the times when you gave of yourself. That helps to nourish the mind. When the mind is well nourished, it's not interested in picking up those obstacles and making them into bigger obstacles than they have to be. When you remind yourself of the happiness that comes from giving, the interest in gaining sensual pleasures and feeding on sensual pleasures gets lessened. When it's lessened, you find yourself less irritable, less bored, less

restless, less uncertain. This is one of the many techniques available for dealing with the hindrances.

Specifically with sensual desire, you can start thinking about what exactly it is that you're desiring so much. And then take a good careful look at the object of your desire, especially if it's sexual desire. Look first at your own body. What's it made out of? What have you got here of any real worth, that's really all that attractive? Take all the pieces apart and what is there? Nothing much. In fact when you start getting into the inner parts, it's positively repulsive. And yet we all find it so easy to turn a blind eye to that. When you look with open eyes, you realize that the object itself is not all that attractive. But then the problem is not so much the object; it's the mind's willingness to close its eyes and make believe.

Ajaan Suwat once made an interesting comment. There's the word *sañña*, which we usually translate as "perception" or "mental label." But in Thai it also means an agreement, a contract. When you look carefully at the way your mind works, you find that it keeps making agreements with itself to turn a blind eye to things, to put up barriers so that it can't see the full story, so that it can focus on what it wants to focus on. Whether it wants to focus on attractive things as a basis of lust or on disagreeable things as a basis for anger, there's a willingness to play a game with itself. This is one of the mind's biggest limitations. This game-playing is what gets us wound up in sensual desires, irritation, ill will, restlessness and anxiety. There's even a part of the mind that's willing to go along with sloth and torpor and uncertainty if it sees that there's pleasure that can come from these things.

The Buddha says that the hindrances are fed by inappropriate attention, which means that when they come along we're willing to play along with them. We're willing to forget about the truths of suffering and stress so that we can get a little immediate gratification. That's what we've got to deal with. Look at the state of mind that wants to get involved in sensual desire, that wants to feed on anger, find satisfaction in anger and ill will, that's happy to see sloth and torpor come along: "Oh, here we are. The meditation's not working; better give up." Try to see the part of the mind that's playing along here, the part that feels that something really useful is being done when it's restless and anxious, the part that likes to be thwarted with uncertainty.

It sounds strange, but there *is* a part of human psychology that takes satisfaction in these hindrances—which is why the hindrances don't just happen to be there. We're playing along with them. We're feeding them. We're creating them. We're throwing up barriers against whatever would thwart our playing around with the hindrances because we feel comfortable within those barriers—or at least we think we do. They're familiar, and the idea of taking them down seems a little bit threatening. More will be demanded of us. But when you stop to

take a really good look at what you've got here, you see that you've placed limitations on the mind's true potential. They put a squeeze on the mind.

So try to learn how to think in more expansive ways. This is why we start out every evening with a chant on goodwill: goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for all beings without limitation, compassion for all, appreciation and empathetic joy for all, equanimity for all, without exception. Try to keep these thoughts as unlimited as possible. Let them stretch your mind, and then try to live within those attitudes. They're called *brahma-viharas*. "Vihara" means dwelling. It's not just something that you visit for a few minutes and then forget about. Ajaan Mun would practice these three times a day. Everyday when he'd wake up he'd spread thoughts of goodwill to all beings. After his midday nap, goodwill for all beings. Before he went to sleep at night, goodwill for all beings. These practices formed the background of his meditation.

So try to develop this more unlimited attitude – which comes through being generous, through being virtuous – as a background for your meditation, as a foundation for your meditation, because it teaches you that true happiness comes through overcoming these barriers by giving of yourself. When you come to the meditation with that attitude of giving, you find that the meditation is a much more expansive place to be, a much more expansive process, so you can work on the more refined barriers we have in the mind: the I-making and my-making that place a limitation on ourselves as well. All the various forms of clinging, everything that we cling to, becomes a barrier, becomes a limitation. As the Buddha said, we define ourselves by what we cling to. And that becomes our limitation, our measure, as he says.

It's in learning how to let go of those very subtle levels of clinging that the limitations are dropped, and then nobody can define us at all. We can't define ourselves. Nobody else can define us. As the texts say: You can't even be traced. The path you follow can't be traced either. Nobody can track you down. Total freedom. That's the direction we're heading in. But the paradox here is that total freedom comes not from trying to *get* total freedom, but by giving of yourself. Because what is yourself? It's a lot of limitations. By letting go of these limitations, you let go of barriers.

That's why the path to the cessation of suffering, the cessation of stress, is not just a mental exercise. It's an exercise of the heart as well. In fact, the limitations we place on the heart probably feel a lot more confining than the ones we place on our minds, if you want to make a distinction between the two. But what it comes down to is that there are limitations on both that we have to overcome. That's why the practice is a whole practice, not just one technique. It's a whole practice of overcoming those barriers on this heart and mind to the point where you can no longer define the heart and mind at all.