

Look Around

March 29, 2022

In the bases of success, the fourth one, the one related to discernment, *vimamsa*, is a hard one to translate into English. Ajaan Lee's favorite translation in Thai, *khwaam rawb ihawb*, means circumspection: looking around, looking at things from all sides. That's one of the features of discernment, he said. It does look at things from all sides.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about how when Ajaan Mun would see him getting a little bit too narrow in his focus. He was very proud of the fact that he was holding to the dhutanga practices, the various ascetic practices, when the monks around him were not. Ajaan Mun saw that holding to the practices was a good thing, but being proud about it was not a good thing. So he had his ways of taking Ajaan Maha Boowa down a notch. At first Ajaan Maha Boowa was upset about it, but after all, this was his teacher, so he thought about it and realized that Ajaan Mun was simply seeing things that Ajaan Maha Boowa was not seeing, because he was looking at things from all sides.

How do you develop that quality? You start by developing it in your everyday activities. There's another passage where Ajaan Lee says, "When you're living in a monastery, you have to make your eyes as big as the monastery." In other words, you have to see what's going on. Each of us has his or her duties that we've taken on, and sometimes we get so narrowly focused on them that other things that should be looked at don't get looked at, places that should be cleaned don't get cleaned, places that should be straightened out don't get straightened out. You might say, "Well, it's no big deal," but there's many reasons why it *is* a big deal to keep things really clean, to make sure that everything is tidy.

Think about the people going to see Ajaan Mun out in the forest. Everyone reports the same thing: that they were amazed at how clean the area was around his hut, around his walking path. If there was a little sala, everything was very neat, even though it was very crudely put together.

There's a story about how Ajaan Lui was trying to get some people from the northeast to invite Ajaan Mun back to the northeast after he'd been in the northern part of Thailand for many years. He told them, "Build a hut for Ajaan Mun, but don't plane the wood. Don't make it too neatly put together." In other words, he liked things kind of rough and naturally put together, but everything was really, really clean. And it's inspiring.

The same when we have nice buildings like we have here. There are a lot of people who put a lot of generosity into making these a reality, and they like to see that the people staying here take care of them. So when your chores are done for the day, look around. See what else needs to be done.

This is supposed to be one of the characteristics of Ven. Sariputta. It's a story that comes from the Commentary, but still it's worth taking to heart. The tradition was that in those days, the first monks who were going to go out for the almsround would come into the dining hall, set it up, and then leave. The ones who came later or returned later, those who finished the meal after the others, were the ones who cleaned up. But Sariputta, even though he was not the last to finish eating, would always stay around just to check and make sure that everything was taken care of. Then he'd go back to his hut to meditate: the characteristic of someone with some wisdom.

After all, looking at things, making sure everything is straightened out from all sides, that's what you've got to do with your mind. All too often we get in these vicious thought-cycles and we can't get out because we can't see another way of looking at things. Everything becomes very narrow: This has got to be that way; that's got to be this way. We get addicted to certain ways of thinking, and they become a spiral, around and around and around. If you can't get out, you've got yourself trapped.

It's like that story of the deer in the forest in the winter. They have their trails through the snow, and as the snow piles up over the course of several months, they stay on the same trails. They strip the bark off the trees next to the trails, and if the bark on those trees gets totally stripped off before the end of the winter, they die. Even though there's bark on other trees in the forest, they don't leave their trails.

So you want to look at your mind with an all-around eye. When you can't sleep because you're tense, and you're tense because you can't sleep, you've got to break the cycle somehow. When you're addicted to a certain way of thinking, you've got to do something to break the cycle. It requires the ability to step back, step out, look around, have that all-around eye.

After all, that's one of the features of the Buddha: He was said to have an all-around eye because he saw things from all directions, and he saw dangers coming from all directions so he was able to deal with them. That's the quality of discernment we're trying to develop.

This is why even the concentration we're practicing is a full-body awareness. If you get too narrowly focused on your one spot, then there are a lot of things in the mind that get hidden. What you see in that one spot may be very clear, but a lot of other things connected to it can get hidden. As with any spotlight, everything right next to the spotlight gets thrown into the dark. You want to create a more diffuse light inside, one that radiates in all directions and sees in all directions. That's how you develop your discernment.

So it starts with little things. As you go through the day, look around you. Try to get a good idea of what other people's chores are and how they're done. There will be some days when someone, for one reason or another, hasn't done his or her chore. Well, you can fill the gap. It doesn't take that much extra, and it's a way of developing a good habit, a habit that carries all the way through.