

Self-starting

August 29, 2023

Once, when the Buddha was discussing the amazing qualities of a Buddha, he focused on things that didn't directly have to do with him but with the people who were born at the same time as him. He said that usually people are focused on sensuality, obsessed with sensuality, they don't want to hear about renunciation. But it was amazing that in the time of a Buddha there were people who did want to hear of renunciation. People are fascinated with becoming, but at the time of a Buddha there would be people who would be fascinated with the idea of going *beyond* becoming.

So, the fact that we're practicing is unusual. It's not normal. It's not ordinary. The ordinary way of the world is just to keep going around and around. The idea of getting out may occur to people sometimes, and there may be a few people who are determined to get out, but they have to be self-starters.

After all, the Buddha himself was a self-starter. It's very unusual for a prince, surrounded by all the luxuries that a prince might have in those days, to think about going beyond that.

There's a passage in one of the Victorian books about the Buddha—*The Light of Asia*—saying that the Buddha had the chance to choose between goodness and greatness, and he chose goodness. What the author meant by goodness was the goodness of a moral life. Greatness, of course was power.

But I think the author had it backwards: Ordinary goodness, domestic goodness, is the goodness where you don't put your release from suffering first. You want to learn how to fit in, you want to learn how to be part of the community, part of the society. You take on all the burdens that come with being a social being—and you're *good* in that sense. But to be *great*, in the genuine sense, means you see that there must be something better: The mind, the heart, deserve something better.

After all, your body is subject to aging, illness, and death. If you're looking for happiness in things that are also subject to aging, illness, and death, there's nothing special about it, and nothing is accomplished.

Think of all those eons and eons of lives that the Buddha saw that he had lived, and what was accomplished? The ones that accomplished something were the ones that were aimed at getting out. And that's rare. So that fact that you're here practicing—that's rare.

It means you're going against a lot of your social conditioning, both good and bad, in the normal sense of the word. You realize there are certain needs for the mind, certain needs for the heart, that can't be met by ordinary social arrangements. You have to train from within, and fortunately the Buddha set out a good course of training.

This is where traditional Buddhist countries differ from ours: They have a system of training for people who want to drop out, basically. Whereas here in America, when people drop out, they don't have much guidance.

I remember reading the book, *Into the Wild*, about a young man who was disillusioned with his family, disillusioned with society. He was trying to find some way of being authentic. But he didn't have much guidance, and he ended up dying.

Think of how fortunate we are that we have the Buddha's path set out for us in a way that's actually supported by the society. Here in America it's not supported by the society at large, but there are enough people that we can survive here, and we can practice, be well-supported. So try to take advantage of that, not in the sense that you're taking advantage of other people, but in the sense that you're taking advantage of an opportunity to do something special with your mind—something out of the ordinary.

Ajaan Suwat commented that during his time with Ajaan Mun, one of the themes that Ajaan Mun liked to talk about most was the customs of the noble ones. He himself had come under a lot of flak, especially when he was starting out. He wanted seriously to practice the teaching that the Buddha had taught, for the purpose for which it was taught—for the sake of dispassion. That's what it means to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma: to practice for the sake of disenchantment, for dispassion, and not simply to fulfill a social role.

Monks at that time were expected to stay in the village—often they were the village doctors—to perform social services. The monks who went out into the wilds weren't trusted. We think of the forest tradition as being an integral part of Thai society, but at that time it was definitely outside of the bounds of normal Thai society.

And again, Ajaan Mun had to be a self-starter. He had to see within himself that the problem of suffering was *the* big problem in life, and if he didn't give himself over to solving it, as he said, he'd keep coming back to be the laughingstock of his defilements. So when people criticized him for following the *dhutanga* practices, not settling down, he said, "Those are the customs of Thai, Lao, ordinary people, domestic society." He was more interested in the customs of the noble ones.

And one of *the* big customs of the noble ones is to delight in developing and to delight in abandoning. In other words, you delight in developing skillful qualities in the mind, and you delight in abandoning unskillful qualities. That delight is what keeps you going.

We're not here to please anybody. As Ajaan Fuang would often say, "Nobody hired us to be born, nobody hired us to get ordained, nobody hired us to come here to the monastery." We've done this all of our own free will. So we don't have to please anybody, but we have to please our better selves—which means doing our best.

When we find ourselves getting discouraged, we do our best to *en*-courage ourselves. During my time with Ajaan Fuang, he never praised me to my face. I found out after he died that he'd been saying good things about me in my absence, but to my face he never gave me

any praise. Part of the reason was, I guess, that I not let it go to my head. But secondly, he wanted me to realize I was not there to please *him*, I was there to take care of the wound in my own heart—or the many wounds in my own heart—and he wasn't going to get in the way. But he did give encouragement, and part of the encouragement was holding me to a high standard.

It was up to me to figure out the reasons for why I wanted to continue with the training and to keep at it. In doing so I developed an important part of the mind: the part that tends to get starved in regular society, but is allowed to flourish when you say, "It is possible to find true happiness, and it comes from developing all your best qualities, and here's an opportunity to do it."

So, keep reminding yourself of why you're here.

The Buddha gives three ways of talking to yourself when you're getting discouraged:

One is to take the Dhamma as a governing principle. Just appreciate the fact that we have such a good Dhamma here to show us the way. It would be a shame not to take advantage of it.

Take yourself as a governing principle. Realize that you started on this practice not because anybody hired you or forced you. You did it of your own free will. You saw that you were suffering, and here was an opportunity to go beyond suffering. It would be a shame to turn away from that. If you really care for yourself, you stick with the practice.

Then there's the world as a governing principle. Realize that there are people in the world who can read minds. When you're getting discouraged, what are they going to think if they read yours? You'd be embarrassed for them to see your thoughts. But you also realize that most people who can read minds—and the kind of people you'd want to look good *in the eyes of*—also have compassion. They have compassion for you, so why don't you have compassion for yourself?

These are just a few of the ways in which you can encourage yourself on the path, to keep yourself going in a way that doesn't have to depend on anybody else. It comes from within. This is one of the few things in the world where you are totally a self-starter, totally responsible for your own actions, in a way that doesn't harm anybody at all, and actually does a lot of good for you and for the world at large.

So take heart.