

Love for the Dhamma

October 7, 2003

Back when Ajaan Mun was alive, scholarly monks would say of meditating monks, "What can they know? They sit with their eyes closed. What can they see?" They're still asking that question today: "What can meditators see with their eyes closed?" Of course the answer is that they see their own minds. Scholarly monks would say, "Here we spend years looking through the books, and we still don't fully understand them. How can you understand them by sitting there with your eyes closed?" The answer is that the real problems in life don't lie in books. Books contain only the names of the problems. The real problems lie in the mind, which is why we sit here focusing the mind on the breath as a way of bringing the mind into the present moment, where we can watch it. We turn our gaze inward, instead of outward.

What do you see when you look outward? You see aging, illness, and death. You see other people's issues: their good points, their bad points. You see the world around you: its good points, its bad points. But those aren't the things that make a real difference in your life. The things that make a real difference are your decisions, the way you manage your own mind.

This is why contentment is such an important principle in the practice: contentment in terms of where you are, the situation in which you find yourself; contentment in terms of your various physical comforts and discomforts. However, in terms of the people around you, you need to find a group of admirable friends. Even if you find just one admirable friend, you've got a lot right there. That's important.

Don't practice contentment with your friends. If they're not people who live by the Dhamma or who speak the Dhamma, if they're people who engage in lying and stealing and divisive speech, abusive speech, and idle chatter, then you don't want to hang around with them. As the Buddha said, "If those are the only people you can find, it's better to go alone." But once you've found a good admirable friend, a good community in which to practice, you should be willing to put up with a lot of hardships.

Think again of the time of Ajaan Mun. He was way out in the forest. People who wanted to study with him had to go walking on foot, many times not even sure they were going to find him, because he was frequently on the move. When someone showed up to practice with him, he was sure that that person really

wanted to practice with him because that person had already put up with a lot of hardships, not only in finding him but also in staying with him.

Ajaan Fuang once expressed a similar idea. Back in the very earliest days of Wat Dhammasathit, it was very difficult to get there. The trip from Bangkok to Rayong took almost a full day, and it wasn't an easy ride. From the highway you had to go further on, six kilometers along a dirt road, muddy and potholed. He said that by the time people came out to see him, having gone through all that, he was convinced that they were really serious about listening to what he had to teach, so he'd be happy to teach them. He said that it was a lot better than the days when he lived at Wat Asokaram, on the outskirts of Bangkok. Anybody with time to kill could come out and try to kill his time, too. Who knew how serious they were, because it was so easy to get there.

A willingness to put up with hardships is an important part of the practice, but it's not just a matter of gritting your teeth and bearing with them. The hardships are essential in helping you gain understanding. When things aren't going well outside, where are you going to focus your attention? Well, you could focus outside and just get upset about things outside, but that doesn't accomplish anything. If you're wise, you learn from the hardships the lesson that you've got to focus your attention more and more inwardly. If you're going to find happiness, you've got to find it inside. This is why the great ajaans were able to find the Dhamma out in the forest: They had to.

We tend to have a romantic idea of the forest—peaceful, green, beautiful forest—because our idea of forest life has become awfully sanitized. Actually, there are a lot of difficulties there. There are dangerous animals—not just the tigers that seem romantic and exciting, but also the day-to-day things: the bugs and snakes and other animals that carry diseases. When you're surrounded by things like that, where will you turn? Our natural tendency is to want to look for happiness in terms of sounds, sights, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations, but when these things aren't all that pleasant, where do you turn? When you get sick and there's no doctor or medicine around, where do you turn? You have to turn within. Being able to keep the mind centered becomes a life-and-death matter. If you can find that sense of wellbeing within, if you can stir up those resources of goodwill and discernment that you're going to need in order to live in the forest, in spite of the fact that things seem to be weighing in on you from all directions, that's where you really learn the strength of the Dhamma, the importance of the Dhamma as a refuge.

This forces you to choose your priorities: What's really important in your life? Physical comfort or the comfort of the Dhamma? Pleasant people who do things the way you like, or people who teach you the Dhamma, people who exemplify the Dhamma? A happiness that's based on things outside, or a happiness that

comes from within? Difficulties on the outside really force these issues in a way that pleasant surroundings don't. Your realization of this, and your willingness to act on that realization: That's what really makes a Dhamma practitioner out of you—when you finally decide that you're not going to hold anything back, that this really is what's most important in life, and you're going to go at it without reservations.

The Buddha gives the image of an elephant going into battle. The elephant fights with his front feet, fights with his back feet, fights with his front quarters and back quarters, but he protects his trunk all the time. He isn't willing to use his trunk because his trunk is his most sensitive part. The elephant trainer sees that and realizes that this elephant hasn't really given himself to the king. It's the same when you balk at discomfort: It's a sign you really haven't given yourself to the practice. The willingness to put up with discomforts, to thrive on them: That's the mark of a true practitioner, someone who really has what they call *dhamma-chanda*, desire for the Dhamma, and *dhamma-rati*, love for the Dhamma. This is what makes all the difference in your practice. If you hold back from the practice, it's going to hold things back in terms of the results you're going to receive.

We miss out on these results because our minds keep flowing out. The Buddha talks about *asavas*, which can be translated as "effluents," both in the sense that they flow out, and in the sense that they're not especially clean. The force of these currents that come flowing out of the mind can drive us all over the place. Sensual desire, views, ignorance: These currents come flowing out of the mind, and we tend to ride with them. You don't really realize how strong they are because you don't try to withstand them. As a result, they can push you all over the place. Only when you decide to turn around and look at them as the main issue will you be able to work free from them. The problem is that they keep pointing outward and saying, "Look. See that over there," and that thing over there is something you want or something you hate. They keep deflecting attention away from themselves.

They're like politicians. Politicians do their dirty work and then they say, "See that person over there? He's doing something horrible." They get you all excited about the other person so you don't notice what *they're* doing. This is the way the mind operates. These *asavas* keep flowing out, flowing out, pushing you in all kinds of directions. To withstand them, as the Buddha says, you have to create an island where that flood doesn't overwhelm you. Even if you can't yet find the ultimate island of the transcendent, you build a temporary island with mindfulness and concentration, so that you're not pushed around all the time. That means taking a stance where you are.

Sometimes, taking a stance where you are requires making some sacrifices. But that's where you make your choice: whether you want to make that sacrifice or just continue going with the flow. Going with the flow seems easy because it's more habitual, but actually there's an awful lot of suffering in going with the effluent flow. You never know where it's going to push you. Like a flooding river, it sometimes hits you with logs and debris, or throws you up against a stone wall. But as you take your stance on your island of right here, right now, even though it may seem more difficult, you begin to get used to it and you realize that you wouldn't want to live any other way. You begin to appreciate the force of the effluents. You begin to see how they push you around, and you see the suffering that comes as a result. That's when you realize that you made the right choice not to continue with your old ways, sloshing around in the world, but actually taking a stance and keeping it solid.

So, it requires powers of resistance. We usually use our powers of resistance to resist things, people, situations, outside. What we've got to do is learn to resist the push that comes from within, the push that makes us want to focus on things outside, that distracts our attention from the real issues bubbling up in the mind. That's the other translation for *asava*, "fermentation." These things come bubbling up, and who knows where they're going to take you if you give in to them?

As you begin to take your stance, you come to see the value of not following through with those fermentations—and you see the value of contentment. You see that once you make your choice, you're going to maintain your stance here as a person who loves the Dhamma more than you love comfort or whatever the defilements are clamoring for. That's when the Dhamma really shows what an excellent thing it is, what a worthwhile thing it is, why it's the sort of thing you can give your whole life to. Ultimately the teaching asks nothing less than that: that you give yourself totally to the practice. But what it gives in return is more than a life, far more than worth the effort you give it.

The Buddha once said that if you could make a deal that someone would spear you with a hundred spears three times a day—morning, noon, and night—for a hundred years, with the guarantee that at the end of the hundred years you would gain Awakening, that would be a deal worth taking. Otherwise, think of all the eons of endless sufferings involved in repeatedly coming back again and again. He said that when you attained Awakening as a result of that deal, you wouldn't even think that you had attained it with pain and suffering. It would have come with joy. So, when you run into hardships in your daily life, compare them to the three hundred spears a day. Put things into perspective. That'll help keep you on course.