

Freedom from Beliefs

December 25, 2009

During my second or third year with Ajaan Fuang in Rayong, the cold season came in. And it was colder than usual for Thailand. Wind was coming down from the north, and I started feeling a little homesick, thinking about what happens in the winter, the snow, all the build-up to Christmas. I happened to mention to Ajaan Fuang that I was getting a little homesick. He said, "Yes, every society has its stupid customs, doesn't it?" He then went on to talk about the Chinese custom of having to go to the family cemetery plot every year in early April. If you didn't go on that particular day, the family would really get all upset. And looking at a culture from outside, it really does seem strange that one particular day would be different from all the other days. Why is there is one day for giving presents, while the day before and the day after are not supposed to be days for giving presents? There's one day to be merry, and as for the other days, being merry is off the calendar. It's all very arbitrary.

It's good to have that perspective of standing outside your culture and seeing how arbitrary a lot of its customs are. It's one of the things we do as we meditate, we try to stand outside of our culture, have some time apart, where it's just you and you can start questioning the thoughts that come up in the mind, because right now, as you're meditating all of them are regarded as distractions. You're supposed to be here with the breath, but you'll find different voices coming up in the mind. Some of them are just random voices, pulling you here, pulling you there. Others come with more of a stentorian tone, ordering you to do something, or saying you have to do something. Sometimes the message comes from your family, sometimes from the culture around you, the media, and you have to learn how to say No to those voices as well.

And you find that it's freeing, that for the time being you don't have to give in to all your compulsions and all of the imperatives that society places on you. Even the parts of society that you tend to believe, you don't have to give in to them, either. It's good to step back from your beliefs and say, "Okay, what am I here for?" How about the issue of, "Why am I causing suffering, how can I put an end to that? Why am I causing stress, how I can put an end to that?" How about just looking at this one issue? After all, this is the issue that really eats away at the heart. Everything we do is for the sake of happiness, yet we find that a lot of things we do for happiness don't work. They actually come out the other way. Some of the things we do are the things we've been told by our society to do, and other

things are things we've simply picked up on our own. Either way, it's good to be able to step back from your old habits and examine them.

That's what the practice is all about: questioning your old habits, questioning things you take for granted, so you can see how liberating it would be if you didn't take them for granted.

This is the principle Ajaan Mun was getting at when he talked about following the customs of the noble ones rather than the customs of the society, normal society. Thai and Laotian people were accusing him of not following Thai or Laotian customs as he was trying to get back to the original practice. He said he wasn't interested in the customs of the Thais or the Laos or anybody aside from the customs of the noble ones. You follow their customs and there's freedom.

Now, this doesn't mean that just Asian customs are customs of people with defilement. American customs, Australian customs, European customs and beliefs: These are all the customs and beliefs of people with defilement. You want to look purely at the issue of why is there stress here? Where is the stress to begin with, what is it, and why is it there? What can be done about it? As for everything else that comes up in the mind, you can regard it as a potential cause for suffering. All the beliefs you have, sometimes very firmly-held beliefs: It's good to be able to step back from them. What if that's not true? What if this isn't true? What if this belief I hold to so strongly is actually a cause of suffering and stress?" At least for the time that you're sitting here, let yourself be liberated from your presuppositions.

Of course, often it's hard to see what you're taking for granted *because* you're taking it for granted. It seems built into the way things are. This is one of the reasons why we focus here on the breath. You know that if you're not staying with the breath, you're off target right now. Anything else that comes up that's not related to the breath is something you want to put aside. And it may shock you sometimes to see how much you have to put aside in order to stay here. Because when defilements come, they aren't obviously defilements all the time. Sometimes they come in more subtle forms. Sometimes they take up the voice of the Dhamma. "You should be doing this. You should be doing that,"—when it's actually not what should you be doing at all. You should be staying with your breath right now.

So you have to learn how to recognize all these voices as distractions, as things you've got to put aside if you really want any freedom. Because that's why we're here. We're looking for freedom: freedom from suffering, freedom from all the limitations we place on ourselves, whether those limitations are dressed up as the bad side of the mind or the good side of the mind. You've got to watch out for

them, especially the ones that seem good. You've got to learn how to question them. What attitudes do you have to put aside immediately, what attitudes do you have to hold on to in the meantime because they're part of the path, and that you have to abandon only at the very end of the path? You learn this only through practice.

So if a thought comes up saying, "Stay with the breath right now," you follow that thought. Any thought that would come up and give you any reason for leaving the breath right now, it's not the time, it's not the place for that thought. It's not Dhamma, because for the Dhamma to be Dhamma it has to be not only true, but also beneficial and timely. Our problem is that we have the Dhamma in books and it's there all the time. You can look up the five hindrances, you can look up the seven factors for awakening, you can look up any topic at any time. But the question is, what particular topic, what particular part of the training is appropriate for you right here right now? If it's a part of the Dhamma that's not appropriate for you right now, then it's not really Dhamma for you right now.

We're in training here. And part of the training means that whatever task you have to learn right now, whatever skill you have to develop right now, that's what you've got to focus on. It's not just a matter of confirming right from the beginning what the Buddha said: "Oh, yes, there are inconstant things and there are stressful things, there are not-self things. Let's let go of them." The real issue is: When is that particular insight useful for you? It might be useful when you're trying to get past a particularly strongly held preconceived notion. See, "Oh, this notion too is inconstant. It's an event in the mind. It's stressful and if it's inconstant and stressful, why should you hold onto it?"

But there are other things that you have to hold onto right now, like the breath. You could tell yourself, "Well, the breath is inconstant, stressful, and not self, so let's just let go of that and get beyond all this issue of having to practice concentration," but that wouldn't work. It'd short-circuit the path. This particular inconstant thing, this concentration on the breath, is something you actually try to make more constant, i.e. through your continual mindfulness, your continual alertness, the ardency with which you try to develop these qualities. That's something you hold on to.

As we were saying earlier today, dealing with human beings is difficult. It requires a lot of skill and a lot of restraint, and skill and restraint are stressful. Now, this doesn't mean that we should abandon skill and abandon restraint when we're dealing with people. That would create more problems. It's a matter of having a sense of time and place, knowing what to hold onto, knowing what to let go of at what time.

Fortunately, as you're sitting here with your eyes closed, you don't have to worry about dealing with people. It's just you and the breath. You learn how to understand the breath, you learn how to gain a sense of where even your perceptions of the breath can place limitations on it, and you learn how to loosen up some of those preconceived notions so that there's a greater sense of ease, a greater sense of well-being, a sense of refreshment, rapture, fullness. These things can be induced if you have a skillful perception of the breath. So if you find that it's not happening, you can remind yourself, "Maybe my idea of the breath is not as skillful as it could be."

You hear about Ajaan Lee talking about the different ways that the breath energy can flow in the body, and you ask yourself, "Where do I feel that? What would it be like if I could feel, say, the breath coming up the back, or the breath coming up the front, or the breath going down the whole body, the breath coming in and out through all the pores? The breath as the primary element I'm experiencing here: Where am I blocking the breath where I don't have to block it?" This requires using your imagination a little bit. What are alternative ways of perceiving the breath?

I remember when I was in Thailand, I was a little bit jealous: For a lot of the Thai people who'd grown up thinking about the breath energy in the body, it was a concept that they had learned how to use and learned how to relate to when they were young. Yet for me it was very foreign. I felt I was operating with a handicap. But you find that regardless of what your background is, you can learn how to use a new idea and adopt it as your own. So allow yourself to think in new terms, and ask yourself, "Where is my thinking getting in the way of accepting that?" And you'd be surprised, sometimes, of what's getting in the way. Again, it's usually something you've taken for granted.

That's a lot of the practice: not taking things for granted, questioning your assumptions to see even where the things that you sincerely believe may be actually getting in the way.

So do your best as you're sitting here meditating to free the mind from anything that's getting in the way of the path, and to figure out which aspect of the path is the one you've got to focus on right now. Have a sense of time and place in your practice. This is a training. Fortunately, it's a training in well-being, a training in liberation. So even though the idea of training may sound onerous, it's actually for our freedom, regardless of your background. It's possible to liberate the mind from not only the bad parts of our background, but also the good parts. That's how radical this freedom is.