

## *Reflecting on the Requisites*

*August 26, 2005*

We used to have traveling salesmen coming past Wat Dhammasathit. They'd drive down the road in their trucks with their wares in the back and a loudspeaker on the top. And most of them didn't have very fancy spiels. The man who sold salt would just say, "Salt, Salt, Salt," as he drove down the road. The man who sold those big water jars that they use to collect rainwater off of roofs would just say, "Water jars, Water jars."

But there was one man who sold Chinese dumplings. And he was special because he had some special spiels. He was also special because you could tell he was a little bit drunk every day as he was driving down the road selling his Chinese dumplings—which is probably why the spiels were so special. My favorite one was when he'd come down the road announcing that, "Today's dumplings are better than yesterdays!"

And we used to laugh about it. Exactly how good could Chinese dumplings get? I personally wondered when he was going to reach the Platonic Ideal of Chinese dumpling, because this went on day after day after day, "Today's dumplings are better than yesterday's!" Then somebody pointed out, "Well, consider: Where are yesterday's dumplings now? What condition are they in? Would you want to eat them?" And the answer of course is No. So no matter how bad today's dumplings might be, they're still better than yesterday's.

You can reflect on this story and get some good Dhamma lessons in all kinds of directions. One direction is thinking about sensual pleasures. Where are yesterday's sensual pleasures? Where are all the good tastes you had in yesterday's food? They're gone. And what did you do in order to get those tastes? What kind of karma are you still carrying around because of what you did to get those tastes, those sights, those smells, those tactile sensations that have disappeared?

Think about this whenever you get a really strong craving for a particular type of food or a particular type of sensation. It'll be there for just a few moments and then it'll be gone. The actual pleasure may go just as quickly, but you'll be left with the leftover karmic residue: what you did in order to get that pleasure. And the question is, is it worth it?

This is one of the reasons we recite that reflection on the requisites every night—food, clothing, shelter, medicine—realizing that they all come at a karmic cost. So you don't want to indulge in them just for the pleasure, the sensual charge you may get out of them—because the charge goes. And no matter how much the mind may try to weave a web of gratification, satisfaction, something special around that pleasure, you realize that that web does nothing but trap you into hungering for the pleasure again.

Psychologists say that people are pretty bad at gauging the pleasure they've had in the past and deciding whether or not they want to try to try again for that pleasure in the future. The

experience may actually be a negative experience. You read about mountain climbers who are miserable as they go up the mountain, but as soon as they're done they can't wait to go back and do it again. That's because the mind weaves such a web around the whole idea of climbing the mountain.

This is one of the reasons why we're so susceptible to advertisements. Advertisers simply weave the same kind of web so that you don't really look at the actual experience. You just get engaged in weaving the web and the fabrication around the pleasure to make it seem like a lot more than it was.

One of the things you have to do as a meditator is learn how to cut through those webs and actually look at a sensory experience for what it is: a brief moment of contact, a brief experience of pleasure or pain, and then it's gone.

This is so that the next time there's any urge to go after that particular pleasure again, you can remind yourself, "Well, what exactly was the experience like? Was it worth it?" And learn to replace your usual web of associations with other associations that are more useful in the long run.

There's that famous sutta where the Buddha compares physical food to story of the couple who has to go across the desert along with their only baby son. Halfway through the desert, they run totally out of food. They realize that unless they eat their baby son, they're all going to die. So they figure, "Well it's better that one dies instead of all three dying." So they kill the son and they make baby jerky. And they eat the jerky for the rest of the way.

As the Buddha asks, "How will those people feel about the jerky? Will they eat it for pleasure and enjoyment?" No, there'll always be that sense that, "Our son is lost." They'd eat it with sorrow. And the Buddha says, "Try to develop the same association with physical food"—realizing that there's been a lot of suffering going into bringing that food to you. If there's meat, there's an animal that had to die. Even if there's no meat, there's still suffering. The people who work—the farmers, farm workers, the people who work in the transport, the people who work in the grocery stores, the people who work to fix the food for you: There's a lot of work that goes just into that mouthful of food. Most of it is hard work and poorly paid.

So what are you going to do with that food? Are you going to pretend that it comes without a cost? Or are you going to be conscious of the cost and do what you can in order to pay it back?

One of Ajaan Lee's more memorable Dhamma talks focuses on the fact that this body we have right here is made of up out of the food we've eaten. And where did we get that food? From other beings. It's as if we've borrowed it. And as he says, there's going to come a point when they call for it back. Throughout life they don't ask for the whole thing back, but they come and collect interest through the aches and the pains and the little diseases we get. But there comes a point when they're going to take the whole thing back. And what will you have at that point? If you haven't used the body in order to develop good qualities of mind, you're

going to be really up a creek.

So this is why we reflect on the requisites. We need them in order to practice, but learn how to use them just for the sake of the practice and don't get distracted into other ideas, other associations around them.

As the Buddha said, reflecting on the requisites in this way, if you really do it properly, is enough to make you a non-returner. So it's not a minor practice, reflecting on food, clothing, shelter, and medicine.

Every time you eat: Think about what you'll be thinking tomorrow about the food you ate today or the pleasant tastes in your mouth today. What will you be thinking about them tomorrow? You'll hardly remember them. They're gone, they're past.

Reflect in this way to get a different perspective on them—on all of the pleasures that you scramble for. Think of them all as yesterday's dumplings. And that'll help bring them into perspective.