

## Wilderness Lessons

March 6, 2008

Ajaan Fuang once commented that when Ajaan Mun went into the forest traveling to different caves and mountains, he always went with a purpose. There was a reason for his going. It wasn't that he simply wanted a change of scenery, or have a good time. He knew either that it would be a good place to meditate or that there were people there or beings there who might benefit from his teaching. Only if there was a reason would he go. I mention this because tomorrow some of you are going to go up to the mountain, to spend the day in the forest there. It's good to think about why you're going, what you hope to accomplish, what you hope to gain from it, and who you may hope to help up there.

There are lots of lessons that can be learned from being out there. One that the Buddha noted was that when you go into the forest and hold the perception of wilderness in your mind, your mind is very different from when it has the perception of being in society. He contrasts the "village" perception and "human being" perception with the "wilderness" perception. The village and human being perceptions carry with them all the affairs of the people you have to deal with, all the issues that go around living in a village. And even though we live here in a forest monastery, there's a kind of a village here. So one thing you can notice when you go into the wilderness is how your mind changes. You can see a difference in the level of disturbance in your mind between being here where you have responsibilities and going up there where the responsibilities are very different. That's primarily a difference in perception. If you wanted to, you could carry all the village issues up the mountain with you, but you wouldn't be taking advantage of the opportunity to see the difference perception can make. You're not just going to a different place; you're carrying around a different perception of yourself in your surroundings.

This is a classic case of *bhava*, or becoming. It's based on a perception, which in turn is based on an intention—in this case the desire to get up on the mountain and let down some of the burdens and responsibilities of being here at the monastery. So there's a lesson you can learn right there: the power of perception over the level of stress or lack of stress in your mind. When you've learned that power, bring it back here.

We live in a world where wilderness for the most part is composed of little islands of wildness surrounded by a sea of civilization. In the past it wasn't that way. Civilization formed the islands, and the wilderness was the sea. We have a slight taste of that here in the monastery. We've got chaparral on three sides. We live in an orchard but it's an orchard surrounded by wilderness. There are wilderness animals out there, and often they come infiltrating into the orchard, foraging for what they can find. They draw no

lines in their heads between wilderness and civilization. In the same way, try to keep that sense of wilderness infiltrating your mind here, so that even as you return here and carry out your responsibilities, there's an element of wilderness aerating those responsibilities to keep them from being quite so heavy. You're free to shift into that perception at any time.

Remember also that wilderness isn't all just relaxation and openness. You have to be careful; there are dangers there. Our romanticized notion of nature tends to forget this. Being in the wilderness means you have to be careful. At present there may not be any wild animals up there that are going to attack you, but you have to be careful as you hike around. We've had wilderness trips in the past where people came back all scarred from being careless. The rocks and other sharp things up there on the mountain don't have the padded corners we often expect in society, so you have to be alert. This is another lesson that wilderness teaches: heedfulness, alertness.

And you're not alone out there. In the Buddha's cosmology, there are devas in the trees, devas in the mountains. When Ajaan Mun went to caves and mountains and forests, he would give thought to the other beings there. He would chant for them, he would spread good will, so that he was actually bringing something to them. And he'd often have to be careful not to offend them. There are stories of his going into caves where monks who had been there before had offended the resident devas by their lack of circumspection, by their general lack of manners. So keep that in mind as well. What energy are you taking up there? Do you know the manners of the forest?

One of the manners of the forest is you're always very clean and neat. That story I told today about Ajaan Lee and the banana grove: His comment on not leaving banana peels lying around applies to all kinds of situations in the forest, and not just to banana groves that appear through psychic power. Be careful of what you say, be careful of what you think, be careful of your impact on the place.

We had a weird incident years back up on the north rim of the Grand Canyon. We'd gone down from our camping spot on Parissawampitts Point to the nearby spring, a natural spring in a lovely meadow surrounded by spruce, pines, and aspen. As we were driving down, the guy who was driving—he was a real estate appraiser—happened to notice one little corner of the meadow that was especially pretty. He thought to himself, "Gee, that would be a nice place to build a house." Immediately he sensed a presence there that said, "No, go away. You're not wanted here." Before long we got down to the spring—it's a spring that's been covered up by cement to keep the water clean and there's a little cement cover on the top. It takes one or two people just to lift up the cover so you can get to the water. And it so happened that someone had left the cover open and a crow had gotten into the spring and died—which meant that we couldn't use the water in the spring at all.

So you need to have manners when you go in the forest.

At the same time, try to receive what the forest has to offer. Walk mindfully through the forest, walk with alertness through the forest, open your eyes to what's there around you. Years back when I was first staying with Ajaan Fuang, one of his lay students came and invited him to visit an orchard over in Chantaburi. Ajaan Fuang took me along. The orchard bordered on a forest with a nice creek running through it. So we went and sat in meditation on the edge of the creek. After a while, Ajaan Fuang—who was maybe about twenty or thirty yards away—threw a stone into the creek to splash me. I opened my eyes and noticed that he was walking around, looking at the trees. I suddenly realized that's what he wanted me to do: not just sit there with my eyes closed, but look.

Ajaan Lee tells of the many lessons you learn by looking in the forest: how trees survive, how the animals survive. The main lesson Ajaan Lee picked up from the forest was heedfulness. You have to be very watchful. You can't be complacent. To survive in difficult situations, you have to learn to be quiet. When you go to a new place, always be quiet. Watch. See what you can learn. If you go in with the attitude that you already know everything you need to know—and this applies to all areas of life—all the lessons that are there just waiting to be picked up get ignored. So go both to give and to receive, to contemplate.

The mountain suffered a fire recently, so look at the ravages of the fire as you go there. You'll notice that some plants are already beginning to sprout. Parts of the mountain are beginning to look green again. But other parts—huge parts—of the mountain are still black. There's a lesson in karma right there. Some of your actions are things that you can quickly recover from. Others leave deep scars for long periods of time. Another lesson in heedfulness.

So look around and see what kind of lessons you can learn while you're up there. Make it a Dharma exploring trip, not just a picnic as I heard one of you say. Use your ears, use your eyes, and keep your mind alert for the lessons of the forest. The National Park Service sign says take only pictures and memories, leave only footprints. Well, our attitude is to give what you can of your good will and bring back whatever lessons you can learn for training the mind.