

## *The Brightness of the World*

*October 21, 2008*

During my first year staying with Ajaan Fuang, he spoke one night of the debt he owed to Ajaan Lee. He said that Ajaan Lee had showed him the brightness of the world. If he hadn't met Ajaan Lee, who knows where he would have ended up?

That statement points to the importance of what the Buddha called having admirable friends: people who show you that life isn't all just grabbing what you can before you die, that there's something noble in human life. There's goodness out there and we can develop goodness inside. As the Buddha once said, there's no other external factor more important on the path than having admirable friends to show you that there is this brightness in life.

We tend to think that the Buddha's teachings focus on the negative side of the world. There's that chant we have: The world is swept away, it does not endure, it offers no shelter, there's no one in charge. This is a point that even newspaper writers are beginning to admit. I read a column today where the author was saying that here's what globalization is all about: We're all connected and there's no one in charge—as if that were a surprise. As the Buddha continued, one has to pass on leaving everything behind. The world is a slave to craving. You look around and you can see a lot of the slaving to craving that goes on.

And then there's the Buddha's first noble truth about suffering, which many people misinterpret as saying that life is suffering. He never said that. All he said was there is suffering, which is clinging. It's one of four noble truths. But there are other noble truths, too. Life also has the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the path to the end of suffering. Those last two truths are the brightness of the world. It is possible to find an end to suffering through what the Buddha called a noble path, noble both in the sense that it leads to a noble truth, the end of suffering, and because the path in and of itself is noble. The activities you engage in on the path are noble activities. So it's important as we practice that we see that there is brightness in the world.

Actually, this brightness is not just in the path to the end of suffering. Any goodness we see in human beings is something we should appreciate, because that gives us the energy to keep on doing good ourselves. This is why gratitude is an important virtue in the path: realizing that you owe your life to the sacrifices of your parents, your teachers, other people who have helped you. And it's important that you appreciate that. If you don't appreciate their goodness, it's

hard for you to see the value of goodness. And if you don't see the value of goodness, it's hard for you to do it.

Even when other people have harmed you in one way or another, the Buddha said to look for their goodness. Even if it's just a little bit, you should focus on that. Because if you can't see their goodness, it's very hard for you to act in good ways, to treat them with kindness and compassion. If all you see are the bad qualities in human beings—their greediness, their selfishness, their thoughtlessness—it's very easy to get sucked into that whirlpool of being greedy, selfish, and thoughtless yourself. For your own sake, you need to focus on their good qualities.

The Buddha gives an analogy: You're crossing a desert—hot, tired, trembling, thirsty—and you see the footprint of a cow in the dirt, and there's a little bit of water in it. You need that water, but you know that if you took your hand and scooped it up, you'd muddy the water, you couldn't drink it. So you get down on all fours and very carefully slurp it up straight from the footprint. Other people's goodness is that valuable. In this case, it's the goodness of the person who doesn't have much goodness. Even to that extent, you have to focus on it.

But if you're angry at someone who really does have a lot of goodness, the Buddha said that it's like crossing a desert—hot, tired, trembling, thirsty—and coming across a huge lake filled with cool water and with trees on the banks. You jump into the lake, swim around, drink your fill, cool off, and then sit under the shade of the tree.

In both cases, notice your position. You need water and so you've got to focus on the water that other people have to offer. If it's only a little bit, you have to be careful about focusing specifically on the goodness, so that you don't get distracted by the bad side. With someone with a lot of goodness, enjoy their goodness, soak it up. Because that's what gives nourishment to your goodness.

There are four qualities the Buddha says to look for in a friend like this. The first is conviction, conviction that your actions really do matter. This is a principle you want to learn from other people, that the choices you make really do make a difference, and the quality of your intention determines whether your actions are going to lead to happiness or not. You want to look for a person who believes in that, because that person is more likely to be kind and generous in his or her actions. At the same time, that person gives you a good example for improving your own attitude.

So conviction is the first quality you want to look for.

The second one is generosity. Look for someone who sees the value of giving. Again, you benefit directly from that, in that you become the beneficiary of that

person's gifts. But at the same time, that person sets a good example for you. The world isn't all about taking. Giving is what keeps human society alive. It also develops the qualities you need on the path. As the Buddha said, a person who's stingy can't gain *jhāna*; a person who's stingy can't attain any of the noble attainments.

You have to see the value of generosity. At the very least, it sets a good example for inner relinquishment. When you're able to let go of things outside—things that you don't really need, things that you can share with others—it helps you to start reflecting on things inside the mind: your defilements that you tend to hold onto—or your unwillingness to forgive somebody. The best way to overcome stinginess, as the Buddha said, is to give a gift. If you find yourself feeling stingy, go ahead and give a gift to somebody. If you don't have anything material to give, well, give your forgiveness. It costs nothing and makes life a lot lighter.

Of course, our sense of being wrongly injured by someone else is something that, for some reason, we tend to hold onto very dearly. But it's like that cobra in the Thai folktale. A farmer comes along on a cold morning and sees a cobra lying in the road, stiff with the cold; it can't move. So he takes pity on the cobra, picks it up, and puts it inside his shirt, so that the cobra can get warm. Then, of course, as the cobra warms up, it bites him. It's a good analogy for our sense of having been wronged by somebody else. We keep it warm, we feel sorry for ourselves. Of course, that sense of being wrongly injured by somebody, wrongly treated by somebody, is going to come around and bite us.

So generosity is a quality to look for in friends, and to appreciate in your friends, and then to copy, to emulate.

The third quality is virtue, people who have principles. They know that there are certain things that are beneath them and they just won't do them. They don't want to harm other people, and as a result they have a sense of shame and compunction. Shame has gotten a bad reputation here in the West, the sense of being ashamed of yourself. In Buddhism, it's actually a positive virtue, and it's not a sign of low self-esteem. It's a sign of high self-esteem. You value your virtue. You think of certain things that would go against your principles, and you would be ashamed to do them, because of the pride that comes with your virtue—and it's not a bad kind of pride to have. That's how you cultivate a healthy sense of shame and its companion, compunction: in other words, realizing that there are some things that if you do them are going to have bad consequences down the line, so you don't want to do them for just that reason. As the Buddha said, these two qualities protect the world. They help us to exercise restraint. So these are good

qualities to look for in someone else, and to admire, and to value in other people, and to learn how to emulate in your own behavior.

The fourth quality is discernment, the ability to see where your actions are causing suffering and to figure out how to put an end to that kind of suffering. Whether it's on the external level or the internal level, learn to see suffering or stress when it arises, and be able to connect it to its causes. This ability starts with a simple question: "What, when I do it, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness?" As the Buddha said, wisdom and discernment begin with this question. Then you look at your actions and see where you're actually causing stress and harm. Because you realize happiness depends on your actions, you want to look and see: In what areas are you deluded?—areas where you don't think you're causing any harm, but you actually are. You want to ferret those out, in terms of what you do, say, and think. That's the beginning of wisdom, the beginning of discernment.

So these are the four qualities you want to look for and to value in other people—the four qualities you want to look for in your friends, the people you associate with, the people you open your heart to. There are going to be a lot of other kinds of people in the world that you've got to associate with. You've got to be very careful about who you open your heart to, who you emulate, who you take as your model.

So it's good to be able to look for the goodness in other people, because your own goodness gets nourished. And you realize that the world isn't full of people who are just scrambling around fighting one another.

The Buddha's vision of the world, before he went off into the forest, was of fish in a puddle. The puddle was drying up, and the fish were desperate. There was less and less water, and there were lots of them, fighting over this ever-decreasing amount of water. It gave him a strong sense of dismay.

But fortunately, he realized that that wasn't the whole story of the world. There *is* goodness in the world. You take that as your nourishment and you realize there's a lot more to the world than just fighting over dwindling resources. It's a world where you're able to develop happiness in another way, through developing noble qualities in your heart.

So when you see those qualities in other people, appreciate them. The people who've been helping you: Show them gratitude. It's by appreciating the little glimmers of brightness in other people's behavior that you begin to see the brightness in the world, the real brightness that grows stronger as you get deeper and deeper into the practice. This appreciation of other people helps keep you

going, gives you good examples, and provides you with nourishment all along the way.