

In Caboots with Your Defilements

April 14, 2009

Ajaan Suwat often commented that people tend to have things backwards. We see our defilements as our friends, and suffering, pain, difficulty as our enemies.

But these friends who are our defilements—they're false friends. They tell us what we like to hear but they take us to suffering. And yet we say that we don't like suffering. If we were actually able to look at suffering square in the face and say, okay, what's actually causing this suffering, we could learn.

And then there's the difficulty of the practice. That's also our friend. Because even though it takes time, it takes energy, it takes persistence, commitment, it gets us out of suffering. It's the kind of friend who doesn't simply go along with our moods but actually points out what's useful to us.

As the Buddha said, that's a sign of a true friend. He doesn't simply flatter you but points out bluntly that there are times when you're actually doing something wrong. And gives you some advice on how not to do that.

That's the kind of friend that the path is. It does have its difficulties. After all, you're going against your defilements, your old friends. And they're going to rebel. And sometimes they'll set up conditions that they'll go away only on their own terms.

Ajaan Maha Boowa once said the question that he gets really frustrated with is when people ask him for a quick and easy way to overcome laziness. Of course that's laziness speaking, "I'll go away only if I can go away on my own lazy terms."

This is why an important part of the practice is not simply watching things arising and passing away. That is an important skill but it's not the whole practice. We also have to look at our defilements to see why we like them. What's their appeal?

When you're immersed in sensual desire, why do you like it?

When you're immersed in anger, why do you like it?

When you're lazy, despondent, why do you like that?

Restless and anxious, doubtful: why do you like these things? What protection do they give you? Or what seeming protection do they give you?

Because sometimes we like our defilements that say, "You don't have to do anything. Just stay where you are." We feel that if we can get a really severe case of these defilements then not too much is expected out of us and so we don't have to really work very hard. That's the side we like about them.

But then you have to look at the drawbacks. Where does it leave you? What kind of life do you have if you give into these things? And look at the

drawbacks very seriously. You realize that you've fallen in with these defilements, the side that you like, but you've got to see that the side you like and the side you don't like are intimately connected. You can't have one without the other. And it's up to you to decide how heedful you're going to be about this problem.

As the Buddha said, there are many levels of heedfulness. There's the heedfulness of the horse who's so heedful that all it has to do is hear the word "whip" whispered into its ear and it'll do what it needs to do. In other words, that's the mind when sees the danger of the defilements very clearly and doesn't have to wait for the suffering to come. You see these dangers in other people, you look at your past, and you realize there's been a lot of suffering going on here, so you've got to do something it.

Then there's the horse that has to actually see the whip.

The horse that has to feel the whip on its skin.

The horse that has to feel the whip dig into its flesh.

And the horse that has to have the whip go all the way into the bone before it's going to be willing to run.

And it's up to us to decide which kind of horse we're going to be.

So when you find yourself going back to a particular defilement over and over again, one, see that it's a defilement. It really does obscure your mind. And then ask yourself, "Why do you like it?" Exactly what kind of pleasure does it give? If you were to take a picture of the mind as it's feeding off that pleasure, what would it look like? Is it the kind of pleasure you're happy to talk to other people about? Or is it a kind of pleasure that you hide?

Then look at the drawbacks. Remind yourself that the pleasures are intimately related to these drawbacks. And decide which is more.

Keep thinking in these ways until you finally can convince yourself that the defilements *are* your enemies. And that the difficulty of the path is your friend.

Being willing to look at the suffering straight-on as a noble truth can get you out. It's part of right view. Remind yourself, though, that suffering is not the only noble truth. There's the cause of suffering, there's the path, and then there's the end of suffering. These things are all possible.

The Buddha's teachings are meant to be a challenge. You can't just simply be contented with your life as it is, because you do have this potential, you have this capability, which so far you've been trying to ignore as you concern yourself with other things: things that are less challenging, things that ask less of you.

So as the Buddha said, the whole of the holy life is having admirable friends. And this applies both to friends outside and friends inside—people who are genuinely friendly, states of mind that are genuinely good for you—and being willing to learn from them.

So suffering: If you're really willing to look at where it comes from, it comes from enjoying your defilements. That's what it comes down to. When you're really willing to look at suffering until it gives you that message loud and clear, that's when you become your own friend.

And that's the most important friend there is. Because if you're not your own friend, nobody else can really help you. Even if the Buddha were sitting right here teaching you, he couldn't help you. You have to want to be a good friend to yourself first. Only then can the path work.