

Dhamma Warrior

June 11, 2009

There's a passage in John McPhee's *Coming into the Country*, where he talks about people who go to Alaska with their minds made up that they're going to live out in the wilderness, get away from the corrupting influence of society. And he said there tend to be two types of people who don't make it: those who decide that they're going to live the way the Indians did, with nothing modern, no modern conveniences at all; and then those who try to take on too many modern conveniences. The ones who survive are the ones who are sensitive to what's actually needed in any given situation, and what's available. They put aside their preconceived notions and learn from what works and what doesn't work. They learn by trial and error. And they learn not to let distractions get in the way of seeing what's actually happening.

This is an important skill that we have to learn as meditators as well. Because on one hand, we do need to study the Dhamma. Even the forest ajaans who talk about learning from your practice and not getting tied up in books: Still, they had to study from some books to begin with to know the Vinaya, to know the basic teachings of the Dhamma. If they didn't pick these things up from books, they had to pick them up from Dhamma talks. So there's an extent to which you have to learn the Dhamma in the books. But then there's a skill of applying it, and that requires a lot of subtlety.

We had an old man who came to live with us at Wat Dhammasathit after he had retired. He'd been a Maha, which means that he'd studied, in his case, seven years of Dhamma studies, and passed the seventh out of nine Pali exams, which is quite an accomplishment. Then he had disrobed and became a lay person, and got a job in government. When he retired, he came out to stay at the monastery. I remember Ajaan Fuang talking about him one day, saying that he had a very coarse understanding of the Dhamma, with no subtlety at all, which I found really interesting: that too much study can make you coarse. It can blind you to the subtleties of what's going on.

This is why the Buddha talks about not only knowing the Dhamma, but also about six other types of knowledge that you need as a meditator. The list starts with knowing the Dhamma. That's the number one knowledge.

Number two is knowing the meaning of the Dhamma. Some of this comes from asking questions, from thinking things through. As he said, you listen and then you think it through, but then in order to really understand the Dhamma

you have to develop the Dhamma. In other words, the skillful qualities in the mind that need developing, you develop them. As you develop them, you find that they teach you about the Dhamma. Through the developing you learn about aspects you didn't realize before.

So here we are moving from what, in the old days, was called scribe knowledge to what's called warrior knowledge. In other words, it's not just knowledge in terms of definitions, in terms of words that can be written down. It's getting a feel for skills by putting them into practice in difficult situations, situations that challenge you and require a sense of balance, a sense of circumspection.

What are some of the other things you need to pick up in these situations? Well, for one, a sense of yourself. What are your strengths, what are your weaknesses, what are you capable of? If you're in a group of people, what's your position in the group? What's the appropriate behavior for someone in that position? What work do you still need to do in training in virtue, concentration, discernment? In other words, be very realistic about where you are, not getting depressed when you find that you've got work to do, and not getting puffed up when you realize you've mastered something. Try to be very matter-of-fact about the whole thing. That, in and of itself, is an accomplishment.

Another type of knowledge you need is a sense of enough. In external terms, this means: How much comfort is enough to practice? How much is too much? How much do you have to put into a particular task? This requires realizing what task you're doing right now: Exactly how important is it? There is that saying that anything worth doing is worth doing well, but that has to be qualified. If doing it well means you're taking time away from other aspects of your practice that are more important, then you've got to cut back, to have a sense of just right. If you go beyond just right it becomes wrong, no matter how right it may seem in terms of your ideas of what should be done, or what's meritorious or whatever. If it goes beyond just right, then it becomes wrong. So you've got to be careful.

We like to have the monastery really nice here, but there are times when putting too much work into the monastery becomes a mistake. We like things to be clean. But sometimes we go beyond just clean, to just really spiffy and really, really nice. That's when it becomes an obstacle. Ajaan Lee talks about how our thoughts of goodness sometimes become Maras, obstacles in the path, because we get fixated on lesser aspects of the practice, or externals at the expense of the internals.

The word *wat* in Thai means both monastery and your duties in the course of the day. And the duties here can be either internal or external. Ajaan Fuang would often say, "Don't let the external wat get in the way of your internal wat." In other

words, the concerns of making things nice outside, nice food, nice place to stay, nice whatever: If they start getting in the way of your meditation, you've got to cut back. So you have to look all around you. As Ajaan Lee's saying, "You have to have eyes on all sides," to gain a sense of proportion, of just right.

The next form of knowledge is having a sense of time: This also means time and place. What's the right time to be a warrior, what's the right time to take on a battle? What's the right time to stay away from the battle? A lot of us who decide we're going to become Dhamma warriors make the mistake of taking up every battle, seeing that we've been weak and passive in the past, and so deciding it's time we get a little bit stronger. Then we just burst into any area and say anything. It's like those old encounter groups where people were encouraged to overcome their inhibitions and just say whatever came to them. And of course it was very destructive. There's a time and a place for different things, and you have to be very sensitive to what is the right time and what is the right place. What's the right time to take on a particular battle? What's the right time to avoid it?

Ajaan Lee talks about living in a forest and learning lessons in avoidance from baby chicks. He tells a story about being with a group of monks and novices who went out one day and found all these baby birds with their mother on the path. As soon as they saw the monks—I think they were quails—the mother gave a sharp cry and the baby quails went running into a pile of leaves. So Ajaan Lee had some novice take a stick and stir the pile of leaves, to see if they could get the baby quails to run out, but they wouldn't. They made themselves into the little baby leaves, and that way they avoided detection. Ajaan Lee then added that as a teacher, as a monk, he had to learn to take a lesson from these baby quails. You may think of Ajaan Lee as quite a warrior. He had the heart of a lion. But he also knew how to adopt the behavior of a baby quail when necessary.

So don't think that when you become a Dhamma warrior you just take on every battle that presents itself. You have to figure out which battles are worth winning, which battles you have a chance of winning, and if you find that you're losing, how to get out. This also relates to the sense of enough, and that of yourself: Which battles are you capable of taking on right now, and how much effort are they worth? We can talk about this in terms of general principles, but in terms of learning the details, you have to learn from trial and error.

This is why the job of a teacher is not just to give Dhamma talks but to notice when someone's getting out of line, and point that out to him. Ajaan Maha Boowa makes a comparison with teaching boxing. He said, you see your students leaving an opening for the opponent, you hit them right there to show them that that's an opening. You've let yourself be exposed. It hurts. And as parents always

tell the children, it hurts the teacher more than it hurts the students, even though the students don't believe it. But it has to be done.

Then there's a sense of people: a sense of when you enter with a particular group of people and they're engaged in a particular kind of activity, how do you behave? So many of us have the attitude of Popeye the sailor man: "I am what I am and that's all that I am." You maintain the same personality and the same demeanor in every situation. But the Buddha wasn't Popeye. Ajaan Lee talks about how the Buddha was able to behave in different ways with different groups. When he was talking with old people, he would make himself like an old person. When he was talking with young people, he would speak like a young person.

I noticed this with Ajaan Fuang. He had some young students and it turned out he knew some young Bangkok slang. They were surprised. Not only that he knew it, but that he could use it rightly and create a sense of connection. There are times when he'd be very quiet and very withdrawn, extremely modest. Other times he'd be very talkative. I began to realize that it wasn't a question of just expressing his personality, but of having a sense of what was the right time and the right place, who were the people that he could joke with, who were the people he shouldn't joke with.

One of his favorite stories was the one about the swans and the tortoise. The swans would fly on a regular basis to a lake and they struck up a friendship with a tortoise living in the lake. They told the tortoise about all the things they'd seen flying north, flying south, up in the sky. The tortoise got very envious, thinking he was just stuck in that little lake. He was never going to see more than just the lake and the shore, yet the swans got to see this great wide world. So he mentioned this to them, and they said, "Oh, that's easy. We can take you up with us."

So they found a stick and each of the swans took one end of the stick in their mouths, and they had the tortoise hang onto the middle of the stick with its mouth. They flew up into the air. And the tortoise, even though it was hanging there by its mouth, with its eyes on side of his head, could see a lot of the world he'd never seen before. But they happened to fly over this group of children, and the children called out, "Oh, look, swans are carrying a tortoise! Swans are carrying a tortoise!" The tortoise got angry, felt that they were making fun of him. So he decided he had a smart answer. He was going to say, "No, it's a tortoise carrying the swans." But as he opened his mouth to say that, of course, he fell down and died.

So the lesson that Ajaan Fuang drew from that was that if you're going to high places, keep your mouth shut. Look. Observe. And don't try to show off your knowledge, because sometimes it'll kill you. So Ajaan Fuang had a very strong

sense of time and place, of who he was with. That was part of being a good Dhamma warrior.

And the final knowledge is learning how to evaluate other people. We often hear that the Buddha taught us not to judge others. In fact, I was reading the other day a supposed quote from the Buddha, in a book called *Teachings of the Buddha*. The first part of the quote is actually from the text. The Buddha says, karma and the results of karma are one of the things you just can't think about. In other words, you can't try to figure it all out, because karma is so complex. But then he goes on to say, "Therefore, Ananda, one should not judge others. If one judges others, one destroys oneself." That whole passage beginning with "Therefore, Ananda," is total fabrication. The Buddha *did* talk about judging other people in terms of how skillful their behavior was, and the purpose of judging them is to look back on yourself: "This is what skillful behavior looks like. Can you do that as well? This is what unskillful behavior looks like: Are you doing that? This is what it looks like from the outside. Do you still want to do that?" If we judge other people just to pass judgment on them, we're missing the true purpose of passing judgment. We should judge to reflect on ourselves.

So we do look outside, but we look outside is with the purpose of looking around inside, to see what work needs to be done. We look outside to look all around us, to make sure the situation we're in is the situation we understand it to be, so that we can learn how to apply our knowledge of the Dhamma, so that Dhamma knowledge is not just scribe knowledge. It becomes warrior knowledge.

We have a sense of what the different teachings mean in different contexts, what we're capable of, who we are, what's just right in this situation, what's the time, what's the place we're in, who are the people we're with. And as we look at other people, what lessons can we learn about our own practice? Because this is where the real battle is: inside, doing battle with your own defilements. Ajaan Maha Boowa compares it to being in a boxing ring. You've got to knock out your defilements. Ajaan Lee talks about actually learning how to convert your defilements to your side. Both approaches are right, but again, you have to have a sense of time and place. When can you convert your defilements and when do you really have to knock them out?

That's how you become a skilled warrior. That's where your knowledge of the Dhamma and its application becomes complete, doing battle with your own defilements inside.