

Quick on the Draw

December 30, 2009

There's an aspect of the Dhamma that tends to get overlooked, and it's related to an aspect of the Buddha that tends to get forgotten, too, which is that he was a member of the noble warrior caste. His approach to the practice was that of a warrior, and the qualities he encouraged were those that a warrior would have to develop. The primary one is heedfulness, wariness, vigilance. You have to be on the lookout. If you were to make a comparison in American culture, it's like being a gunslinger in a Western. You have to watch out and be very careful all the time because there are people ready to shoot you down. And you have to be quick on the draw.

The Buddha himself makes a comparison very much like this. In those days, you had to be a good archer if you were going to be a good warrior. And he says a meditator has to be like a good archer: able to fire shots in rapid succession, to shoot long distances, to pierce great masses. The rapid succession is being quick on the draw. What do you have to shoot down? You shoot down your defilements.

That's something else we don't like to think about: that we have defilements. We like to think that we're coming here with our basic good nature, and all we have to do is sit here and our good nature will blossom, and that'll take care of everything. But exactly which part of your nature are you going to trust? Are you going to trust the greed, the anger, or the delusion? Because they're in there, too. Fortunately, they're not embedded in our nature, but they are qualities we have developed over time. And they have their reasons. They have their arguments. They have their ways of luring you into doing things. And it's hard to see them as "them" because you identify with them so much.

A thought comes in to the mind, you say, "Yeah, that sounds like something I'd like to do." You're already running with it, forgetting that when the thought first appeared, it was simply that: a thought, neither good nor bad. And it was neither you nor something else. It was just there. And the question is: What are you going to do with it? It's what you do with it that makes all the difference. As soon as you begin to recognize that it's going to lead you in an unskillful direction, you've got to do something. You can't just let it grow and spread its tentacles into your mind, because then it gets harder and harder for you to do battle with it. It's taking up more and more of the territory. More and more of the voices in your committee are suddenly echoing what it has to say. Like that old principle of the

Big Lie. If it keeps getting repeated over and over and over again enough times, it seems to be the truth because that's what everybody is saying.

So you have to be careful. You have to be quick. As soon as you see a thought appearing in the mind that's going to take off in that direction—and you know the direction it's going to take you, it's not like you haven't had an experience with these things—you have to recognize the part of the mind that wants to go along with an unskillful thought as something you have to shoot down. So if it comes with its arguments saying, “Hey, you're stressed out now. You need a really quick fix to relax,” you say, “Well, aren't there other ways of relaxing? Aren't there other ways of releasing the stress? Why do I have to believe these old ways of doing things? Don't I have any imagination?”

You might want to sit down after meditation sometime and ask yourself: When an unskillful thought comes into the mind, what arguments does it have? Especially if it's related to a strong addiction. You know the addiction really well. You know its arguments. Just put its arguments down on the page and start thinking about things that you can use to counter them. Counter each argument. It helps to get you quicker on the draw the next time.

It's just like the gunslinger who has to keep practicing, shooting tin cans on a fence, bang, bang, bang, until he gets really quick at it. And it's the same with dealing with your defilements. You've got to practice. You've got to think about this. We let our lives get taken up by the work that other people impose on us. We forget that we have our work, too, for the sake of our own good, for our own true well-being. And it's good to think about: Exactly how does an unskillful thought move in on the mind? What are its arguments, what are its reasons, what are its tricks? You can't let your defilements have all the good lines. You've got to develop some good lines of your own.

It's like that play that appeared in New York way back when I was a kid. It was called *The Snake Has All the Lines*. It's about Adam and Eve in the Garden, and the snake was the one who had all the quick and clever lines. That's why the snake was able to win out. So you can't let your defilements have all the lines. You've got to think up some quick and snappy responses. Look into *Awareness Itself*, look in *The Gifts He Left Behind, In Simple Terms*. Those books of the ajaans were their responses to questions. The responses came really fast because they had had experience with their own defilements, learning how to shoot them down and not let them move in and take over.

So you've got to be quick on the draw, and that requires practice. And as I said, it's not like you haven't had experience with these things. You have. You've given in to them many, many times. And you know what arguments you tend to give in

to. One argument says, “Well, just one more time won’t make a difference.” Another one says, “You’re going to give in anyhow, so you might as well give in now.” For that one, you can say, “Well, I don’t know about tomorrow or five minutes from now, but I do know right now. I’ll be responsible for right now.” At least once, take a stand. It says, “Well, that doesn’t mean anything. You take a stand now, you’re going to give up later.” You say, “I’m going to take a stand right now. The Buddha says that that thought right there is a skillful thought.” Then five minutes later it comes back, you can say, “It’s still right now.”

In the meantime, you’ve got to work on your skills in looking after the mind so that it doesn’t feel hungry and desperate all the time. That’s what greed is: desperation. And in desperation we do a lot of stupid things. So you’ve got to encourage yourself. Work with the breath to make it comfortable. Develop the thoughts that remind you that there are areas of your life where you have been competent, where you have been able to withstand unskillful thoughts. You look at the addictions that other people have, the ones that seem strange to you. You might say, “Well, at least I don’t have that addiction”: whatever you need that gives you some encouragement so you don’t feel like a total loser, you don’t feel like a total washout.

Remind yourself that you do have some good to you, and then work up from there as you begin to get more and more skillful on the path. Take pride in your skill. The pride of a craftsman is a useful kind of pride. The Buddha doesn’t ask you to let go of pride until you don’t need it any more, i.e., at the end of the path. Meanwhile, learn how to use it skillfully. You’re not trying to compare yourself with other people, you’re just taking pride in your own skill. That kind of pride is not to be abandoned.

And part of taking pride in your skill is that you want to keep it up, i.e., keep practicing. An important part of pride in skill is learning how to recognize when you’ve made a mistake, learning how not to get knocked off balance by it, but at the same time learning from it and wanting to do better the next time. A lot of us are unfortunate that our parents didn’t instill this attitude in us. But we can learn how to instill it in ourselves.

At the same time, we have to learn how to withstand influences from outside, because when other people come along, they have their defilements too. Why do you have to give in to their defilements? Your defilements are bad enough. It’s bad enough when you’re identifying with your defilements. Why do you have to identify with theirs? Why do you have to take them on? When people are criticizing you because of their greed or because of their aversion delusion, why do you have to listen?

This is particularly true of all the weird messages we pick up from the media. So much of what comes in through TV or the movies, magazines, or whatever, is defilement, pure and simple. Why should we believe in it?

I noticed when I was with Ajaan Fuang, he had a very skeptical attitude toward a lot of Thai culture. And as I would tell him about some of the ideas I picked up from American culture, he was very skeptical about American culture as well. At first I was surprised, because you tend to think of meditators as sweetness and light. But then you realize that if he weren't skeptical about other people's attitudes, how could he be skeptical about his own? This is the attitude of a warrior and the gunslinger in the Western. You have to be wary. You have to be quick. And you have to develop that inner strength so that you know when you're facing down an enemy that you're going to be able to deal with the situation, not just run away or succumb. That's how you come out ahead.

As for shooting long distances, that's when you're able to see a defilement just as it begins to appear on the horizon. Piercing great masses, that's piercing the ignorance that we use to shroud our unskillful attitudes. When you really look at your unskillful thoughts, you can see that the reasoning is really, really shoddy. They cover it up in mystery and they cover it up in the trappings of power. They've been in charge for a long time, and we all know that the powers that be are there not because they deserve to be there, but simply because they've learned how to create the impression that they deserve to be there and that they deserve to stay there. The same principle holds in the mind. The parts of the mind that want immediate gratification have learned how to dress themselves in the trappings of power—as when they say, “Well, you're going to give in anyhow, so you might as well give in now.”

There's no need to believe that at all. There's no reason to believe that at all. Yet we believe it so easily, because we don't have any other skills. And it's largely a lack of imagination to begin with. We can't even imagine ourselves developing those skills or what those skills might be, or that we would have the potential to develop them. Yet we do. Remind yourself that you do have your resourceful side. And you want to take advantage of it. Don't let the defilements be the only ones that are resourceful. The voice of Dhamma in your mind that you're learning to cultivate, that you're learning to develop: That has to be resourceful, too. The inner teacher that Ajaan Fuang talks about, the one who's looking after you for your own good, is the teacher who doesn't say, “Well, the compassionate thing is just to let the students do what they want, that'll keep them happy.” There are things the students need to learn if they're going to function properly, if they're

going to be mature, if they're going to grow. And the compassionate thing is to find some way to make them do it, to make them want to do it.

So you have to learn how to talk to yourself, create the right attitude in mind. That's what right effort is all about. That phrase, "generating desire" means creating the proper attitudes in the mind that you *want* to practice, that you *want* to be free of suffering. This, as Ajaan Mun used to say, is the one thing you really want to hold on to: the desire not to keep coming back and suffering again and again. Hold on to that desire, because it's based on the realization that you've been suffering a lot and you don't have to. It is possible to develop skills.

We spend so much time thinking of ourselves as consumers that we forget our potential to be warriors as well. These people who have been selling us whatever: Why do we trust them so much? Part of it is because they've moved their little box or now their flat screen into our homes, and they keep telling us what they want us to hear. But if we weren't susceptible to those kind of thoughts, they wouldn't have any impact. They tell us that true happiness is impossible, that the people who try it are tied up psychological weirdos. Why do you have to believe them? They just want your money. They don't care about you. So why should you let their attitudes take over? At the very least, you should care about yourself. You want to protect yourself, so you have to be wary. You have to be quick on the draw.

When you have that warrior attitude, that gunslinger attitude, it helps you sort out a lot of things in the mind that you've simply been going along with, going along with, going along with for who knows how long. You suddenly realize you don't have to. You start gaining some skill in learning how to avoid a lot of the traps you've set for yourself, so that you can shoot long distances, fire shots in rapid succession, and pierce great masses. That's when you find that you really grow in the practice.