

Of Essential Worth

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The Buddha was once approached by a brahman who said, “This business of going forth, training the mind, doesn’t really help many people. You train your mind and you’re the only one who benefits.”

Whereas the brahmins had many activities and were helpful to many. In those days, some of the brahmins were very wealthy landowners, and this brahman said that by having a large farm, by having lots of activities, lots of big sacrifices, you benefit large groups of people.

We see the same kind of thinking today: that people who meditate are just looking after themselves, they’re not helping the world. If you really want to have a good effect on lots of people, you’ve got to go out and get involved in politics, get involved in business, get involved in charity work. That’s what they say, but that kind of help is superficial.

As the Buddha pointed out to the brahman, when one person really finds the Dhamma, that person can teach many, many others to find something that really is of value, of lasting value.

After all, the essence of the Dhamma is release. Anything short of release is just twigs, bark, softwood. The real essence—the word *sāra* means “heartwood,” but it also means “essence”—is release.

That’s a happiness that doesn’t change, is not affected by any kind of condition, doesn’t leave any problems left over. Other solutions for people’s hunger, people’s poverty, always leaves problems left over.

So this is a practice that really helps a lot of people. It really helps the world in an area where other forms of help just really can’t reach: deep into the heart, to the part that really is essential in each of us.

Sometimes you hear that the Buddha was an anti-essentialist, saying that there is no permanent self, no permanent essence to anybody or anything. But he never said that. It’s not one of the issues he got involved in.

But he did teach that there is an essence in release, and that whatever leads you to release is of essential worth.

So always keep this point in mind. This essence is where we’re headed. It’s where we’re aiming as we practice: something of really solid value; something that, when it’s attained, doesn’t change into anything else and has no negative impact on anybody at all.

We see the example of the great ajāns, and it reminds us that within each

human being there is this potential. We're not just digestive tracts. There's something of greater value within us and we're capable of greater things.

It takes work, takes a lot of dedication. And often we're afraid to put in that effort for fear that it's not going to give results.

One of the really famous ajaans has said that before he set out on the path of practice, he was really concerned about this. There was the belief in Bangkok in those days that the time not only for nibbana but also for jhana had passed. There was nobody out there attaining genuine jhana. Anybody who thought they had jhana— to say nothing of nibbana—was just deluded. If you believe that, then it really discourages you. You think that if you were to put in a lot of effort, it would all be in vain—a very discouraging idea.

But then he met Ajaan Mun. And just seeing Ajaan Mun, he said he was convinced: There is the possibility that the path is still open and the effort would not be in vain.

This is how the example of one person who really has gotten results in the practice can have a huge and really deep impact on people around.

I know in my case it was with Ajaan Fuang. When I first read the teachings about people going past greed, aversion, and delusion, it sounded like some sort of dried-out husk. Who would want to go in that direction? But there were a lot of good things in the Buddha's teachings as well, so I was willing to put that question aside for the time being. But it always there in the background: What kind of person would come out at the other side of this kind of training?

Then I saw Ajaan Fuang interacting with other people, the stories he told of Ajaan Lee, the examples of the other forest ajaans. I realized that these were not dead dried-out people. They were very curious, very—in the case of Ajaan Lee, I would say lion-hearted. These were people who were weary of the world not out of weakness but out of strength. They had very active minds; they were very inquisitive; very observant; very, very stable.

I think it was Ajaan Fuang's stability that most impressed me. And seeing his example was what made me want to practice. As he kept saying, he wasn't born that way. It was only from having met Ajaan Lee and, as he said, "having seen the brightness of the world" that he became the person he was.

So I decided I wanted some of that, too. That's why I started practicing.

So when you practice, you're not the only one who benefits. At the very least, you're not inflicting your greed, aversion, and delusion on other people, to the extent to which you are able to clear those things out of your mind. But you're also setting a good example. And if you become a member of the noble Sangha, you become a refuge for others.

When we take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, it's because they've set an example of what a really honorable human life is like. They suggest the possibilities of what human beings can do. And it's an inspiring set of possibilities.

So this path is something that really is worth giving your life to.

And as the Buddha pointed out many, many times, when you give your life to this you, get much in return: something of really essential value. And it has a very positive influence on the world.

The Buddha could have become a very generous king and distributed alms. But his life wouldn't have had the impact, anywhere near the impact that it has had on us because he chose a different way.

I remember reading a Victorian book on Buddhism, and the author said the Buddha had the opportunity to choose between greatness and goodness, and he choose goodness. I think the author got it backwards. The Buddha chose greatness—not in the sense of worldly power, but in the sense of the greatness of the heart. He wasn't just good. He went beyond good. That's why he has been the inspiring example that he has been to all of us.

It's up to us to keep that example alive so that it's not just a story from the past—and so that we can continue setting an example now and on into the future.