

The Right Focal Length

December 26, 2012

When I was in Thailand, I talked to a monk who had had some problems with the community that he was in charge of—to the point where he left. He made an interesting observation that the problems stemmed from the fact that a lot of the people in the community didn't take the four noble truths seriously.

What he meant, of course, was that they kept complaining about things outside, blaming their sufferings on conditions outside, and never taking seriously the idea that maybe their suffering was actually coming from within, and that your main focus should be inside. Actually, one of the purposes of having a monastery that's not all that comfortable—particularly in a monastic life where we can't determine from one day to the next what our food is going to be, and a lot of other conditions are totally out of our control—is to keep emphasizing that you've got to look inside.

If there's any suffering, any stress in the mind, you do what you can to create situations outside so that it's okay. But there are severe restrictions on what you can do. So the main focus has to be inside. There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about having the common sense not to go walking into trenches, or falling into cesspools, or tripping over cows at night. That's one of my favorite lines in the Canon: walking around and tripping over a cow.

In other words, you use common sense to avoid dangers. But given the normal ups and down of human life—when you're dealing with difficult people, where you're dealing with limitations of having a body, and the fact that you're a human being living in a human realm—you really have to focus your primary attention inside, to see what it is in the mind that keeps complaining. What is it in the mind that keeps saying, "This isn't good enough; that's not good enough?" And even when it's not good, the question is: "Is it good enough? Can you survive?

There was that time early on in my time with Ajahn Fuang when he told me out of the blue to sit up all night and meditate. My immediate reaction was that I'd been working hard all day and I just didn't have the energy. And he said, "Look, is it going to kill you?" "Well, no." "Then you can do it." And of course, I was able to do it and it didn't kill me. And even in situations where you think it might kill you, he said, "Maybe the mind is creating all kinds of monsters where they don't exist. It's good to test them."

This is why contentment with external situations is an important quality to develop in the practice, along with gratitude for the things you do have. We have a

peaceful place to practice here. We're not under a lot of pressure to go out and try to bring in disciples or build large buildings or whatever. Things are quiet. Things are simple. There's a lot of time to practice.

So try to develop a sense of contentment. Try to develop a sense of gratitude: "At least I've got this opportunity right here, right now, to practice." And that's the important thing, because that gives you the space to turn around and look inside. What is it about the mind that's constantly complaining? "This isn't good enough. That's not good enough—this person, that thing," or whatever.

Try to develop patience and endurance. And the two things you've really got to work with to develop these qualities, as the Buddha said, are harsh pains and sharp words. The things people say can often hurt a lot more than a bad knee or a bad ankle.

So what wisdom have you developed in order to be able to withstand these things? What inner strengths have you developed so that you can say, "Well, I can live with the food that's here. And I can live with the conditions that are here. And it's okay. I don't have to go way out of my way to create a special diet, or to create special conditions like this or that."

Otherwise, everything gets focused on the outside, and what's going on inside gets totally ignored. But where *are* the causes of suffering? Inside you. There's the clinging, the craving, the ignorance, and all those other factors in dependent co-arising that are whirling around in your mind right here, right now.

It's like taking a picture with a camera. The interesting things are right close up, but you've got your lens set to infinity, which means that what's close up is going to be blurred. Sometimes it's so blurred you don't even see it. Your focus is way out some place else. So bring the focus in right here. What's going on with this breath? What is the mind doing with this breath? Is it staying with the breath? Or is it fabricating all kinds of issues, developing all kinds of problems, long commentaries on this, that, and the other thing?

The reason we have that reflection on the requisites—food, clothing, shelter, and medicine—is to remind you that you have enough to take care of the needs of the body, and if you struggle to get more than just enough, you're putting yourself further into debt to the beings oppressed by the extra burden you're placing on them.

Or think of those contemplations that Punna reported to the Buddha. He was going to go off to a rough part of India and went to see the Buddha to say goodbye.

The Buddha said to him, "That's a pretty rough part you're going to. What if the people there say nasty things about you?"

And Punna responded, "Well, I'll think that they're very civilized in that they're not hitting me."

"What if they hit you?"

"I'll think they're very civilized in that they're not throwing stones at me."

"What if they throw stones at you?"

"I'll think they're very civilized in that they're not stabbing me."

"What if they're stabbing you?"

"I'll think they're very civilized in that they're not killing me."

"What if they kill you?

"At least my death wouldn't have been a suicide."

When you're dealing with difficult people, keep that in mind. Also remember the Buddha's image of the bandits with the saw. If there's some way you can fight them off, you do fight them off. But you don't let ill will get in the way. If you find that they've totally pinned you down and there's nothing you can do, even then you're not supposed to have ill will for them. That's the point when you tell yourself, "There's really nothing I can do. I have to give up. But I'm not going to have ill will toward these people" because otherwise your mind would get fixated on them, and who knows what kind of rebirth that would lead to?

We had someone in here this morning, chanting the passage for goodwill. The chant said, "May I be free from oppression," but the person said, "May I be free from obsession." Well, that's right. Think about the things that the mind's obsessing about. Try to develop the attitude where you just do your duties outside. You do what has to be done outside. But your main issues are inside, right here, so that's where your attention stays focused: What's the mind cooking up right now? What new issues is it creating to stab itself with?

Try to take those four noble truths seriously. *The cause of stress and suffering that's weighing on the mind is what's happening in the mind itself.* The things outside that it brings in to aggravate its suffering are brought in through craving and clinging.

So try to examine your cravings and clingings. That's where the focal point should be in these pictures you're taking of your mind. That's where the real issues are—and where the solution is, too.