

Look at Yourself

September 26, 2013

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, there were a couple of times when people would come and take pictures of him. They'd ask him to sit in the meditation posture for the picture, but he would never look at the camera. He would always gaze down. I asked him about it one time. He said, "Well, I'm looking at my own mind; I'm looking at my own heart." He wanted the picture to be a lesson. That's what the meditation is all about. You want to look inside; you want to look at yourself.

That's where the training is focused: on straightening yourself out—and it's a hard lesson for us to learn. We spend our time looking at other people because we think that's where the problem is. Yet you can look at the rest of the world and try to straighten out the rest of the world as much as you like, but, one, the world refuses to be straightened out in a lot of ways; and two, you can develop a lot of unskillful qualities that way. So you've got to turn around and look at yourself.

Some people complain that this is making the victim the perpetrator. In other words, if you've been suffering from other people's actions and suddenly the blame is being placed on you, you don't think it's fair. But you have to remember: What other people do to you doesn't reach into the heart unless you *let* it reach into the heart. They can hurt your body; they can hurt your physical surroundings. But only if you've let them come in and grab your heart will they be able to have any influence on your heart.

It's like that old story of the warrior who had his heart hidden away in a tree. People couldn't kill him. They would stab him right in the middle of the chest, but his heart wasn't there, so they couldn't kill him. It was only when someone figured out that the heart wasn't there—it was stashed away in a tree in the forest—they went and found it.

I remember this vividly. I once saw a masked drama they called a *Khon* in Thai that depicted this story. On one side of the stage, there was the warrior; and on the other side of the stage, there was a little tree, where the warrior's heart was hidden through a magic spell. The good guy was going in to get the warrior's heart. He reached into the tree and squeezed. And all of a sudden, on the other side of the stage, the warrior suddenly clutched at his chest and fell dead.

You can take that as a Dhamma lesson: If you place your heart with other people, they can squeeze it. So you've got to place your heart inside, place your gaze inside, and look at yourself.

This is what the four noble truths are all about. The cause of suffering is craving. Whose craving? Yours. The cause of suffering is ignorance. Whose ignorance? Your ignorance.

So you have to remember—not only while you're sitting here and meditating, but also as you go through the day—that you want to watch the state of your heart. Sometimes it'll come out in your actions. It can't help but be reflected in your actions, so you take care of your responsibilities in the world. But here at the monastery, the bottom line is that each of us is gazing in his or her own heart as we do our duties throughout the day. It's there that the real work is done, the real work is accomplished. The suffering that comes from our own craving, comes from our own ignorance. It's not going to be solved by looking at other people's ignorance or trying to straighten other people out.

There's a level of devas called the devas corrupted by play, the devas corrupted by mind. They spend all their looking at each other and give rise either to lust or to envy. Because of the lust and the envy, they fall from their deva realm down to a lower realm. And it's the same with us. We can look at each other and give rise either to desire or dislike, but that doesn't accomplish anything. It simply pulls us down. No matter how much you feel that your desire to straighten other people out is a good desire, you're looking in the wrong place. Remember the acrobats. You have to maintain your balance and in doing so, you help other people maintain theirs. If you're reaching over to straighten out their balance, you're leaning over. And of course, when you're leaning over, it causes other people to lean over as well, and everybody falls down.

Always remember that the problem is inside. The four noble truths point here; appropriate attention points here: Look at the skillfulness of your actions; look at the results. That's how the Buddha himself found the path. He'd follow a certain practice. Notice, he'd follow a practice and he would look at himself in action. Sometimes we think that all we have to do is get the mind really, really still and see things arising and passing away, and the mind will automatically let go. Well, the Buddha had his mind very, very still, and there were still problems. You can have insight into things arising and passing away and then suddenly drop that because you think something's worth going for.

It's like pictures in a book. You know they're made out of little dots of ink. But if they're really beautiful, you can gaze at them for a long time, and you can decide to buy the book. So even though experience may be formed out of just little impressions that arise and pass away, and we know that, we can still go for things because we think it's worth it—that there's something to be gained by going for them.

So you want to watch yourself in action as you go for things. If you see yourself going for something unskillful, you can learn how to stop. You've learned a lesson. Then you try to develop the mind in a skillful direction looking inside, learning to calm the mind down. This is our main activity, this activity based on tranquility. And it's also based on insight—beginning with the insight that if you're going to solve the problems of suffering and stress, you've got to look inside, get the mind to come to concentration, get the mind to the breath, and then get the mind to settle down.

There are people who find this easy. All they have to do is just drop their concerns in the everyday world and *bung!* they're down. But most of us are not like that. We've gotten so entangled in the world that we have to take things apart bit by bit by bit, understanding how the mind goes out after sights, goes out after sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas. We have to look into that. It's in the course of looking into those things and understanding how we do it: That's how we can let go and get the mind to come to stillness.

So there is concentration that comes from thinking, concentration that comes from insight. That moment of tranquility when you see, "Oh, this is not really worth going after," and you get the mind to settle down: That's tranquility and insight working together to get the mind in concentration. Then, of course, once the mind is concentrated, your insight is sharper; the tranquility is stronger. The two qualities work together, strengthening each other.

In doing the activity of stilling the mind that you're going to see both your skillful qualities and your unskillful qualities in action. Then you get to see which ones are worth it, which ones are not. The ones that are blatantly unskillful, you can see pretty quickly. The ones that are more and more refined levels of skillfulness—that takes time. Something that's skillful in the beginning of the practice—or that *seems* skillful in the beginning of the practice: After a while you begin to realize it's skillful only on a coarse level. You're trying to bring the mind into deeper and deeper levels of subtlety so that you can see these things more clearly and raise the level of your skillfulness.

It's only by looking at yourself in action that you can see these things. For a lot of us, that's hard. We don't like seeing our mistakes. But if you don't admit your mistakes, you're never going to learn from them.

I ran across a quote today about the Bourbon monarchy prior to the French revolution. Talleyrand apparently said that they never forgot anything but never learned anything. In other words, they never forgot a slight, but they never learned from their own mistakes. That's a bad combination, but many of us are just like that. We never forget what other people do to harm us, but we never

learn from our own mistakes. That's a recipe for disaster. As a practitioner, you want to be able to admit with honesty and with good nature that, yes, you've made a mistake and you're willing to learn.

The practice requires a certain amount of maturity. A simple meditation method is not going to do the work; you've got to develop qualities of character. That willingness to look at yourself—to look at yourself in action and see where your own actions could be improved: That's a sign of maturity. That's the maturity of the practice.

So remember, your gaze should always be inward. That's the primary focus because that's where the primary problem is—and it's also where the solution could be found.