

## *The Bowl of Oil*

*April 11, 2014*

Years back, when European and American observers went to Asia and observed Buddhists over there, the Buddhists seemed happy. These scholars said, “These people don’t understand their own religion. The Buddha taught a very pessimistic doctrine, all about suffering—nihilism.” Of course, the real issue was that the Westerners didn’t understand what the Buddha taught, and it was the Asians over there who did. The Buddha’s teachings are very happy. They offer a way of understanding life so that you can put an end to suffering, and it works. They see people among them who are happy and even though not all of them may be practicing all the way, still there’s that sense of confidence that comes when you know you’ve got a good handle on life, a good set of teachings you can rely on as your basic working hypotheses. It’s all very positive. You can put an end to suffering. How positive can you get?

And temple festivals have been a long part of the tradition. Look at the very first one after the Buddha’s passing away: music and dancing for seven days. Of course, it was solemn dancing, but still, there was a sense that they’d been present during something really important and they wanted to celebrate that.

It’s good to keep these thoughts in mind because we’re going to be having a busy weekend this weekend, with people coming to make merit for Songkran. It’s not specifically a Buddhist holiday, but it’s become Buddhist here in the West, as people take it as an opportunity to practice generosity. That’s something for which we should have some empathetic joy. It’s all too easy to get irritated when you’re trying to find some quiet here, and this tornado of activity comes through for a couple of days. But it’s not a destructive tornado; it’s a good one. (I guess that’s a bad image.) There’s going to be a lot of activity and it’ll require two things on your part. One is that you have to learn how to keep your center. This is where equanimity is useful. Things arise and pass away, and just keep it at the arising and passing away level. And as for the part of the mind that complains, you don’t have to listen to it—because the practice isn’t just sitting with your eyes closed.

The Buddha taught a complete path. It includes generosity and virtue along with the meditation, and so be happy in other people’s generosity. Now is a good time for us to practice our generosity, too. Especially for those of us who live here long-term, there’s a common tendency to start getting possessive about the place. And this is a good reminder: We’re not in this alone here. This is not our place. The place has been built through the generosity of lots and lots of people, many of

whom we've never seen, and this weekend will be a chance to get to meet some of them and to make merit together. So the issue is having a positive attitude toward all the activity and, at the same time, internally having the ability to keep your mind at equilibrium—to have your inner gyroscope keeping you on course.

This is a matter of right view and right effort. If you see any negative mind states coming up in you, it's your responsibility to take care of them—and don't wait until you're sitting here meditating to take care of them. You have the chance throughout the day: If you see anything negative coming up, you say, "I don't want to go there. I don't have to go there." This is a good rule of thumb, not only while we have an active weekend like this, but all throughout your practice. Whatever comes up that's unexpected, whatever comes up that's not in line with what you want and anticipate, your first priority is to keep watching your state of mind. Make sure it's balanced and it's got the sublime attitudes there to help it: starting with goodwill, its two manifestations as compassion and empathetic joy, and then the equanimity. These are the virtues with which we interact with other people. Make sure the interaction doesn't hit us in the wrong way.

Remember the Buddha's instructions for when you hear something that really, as they say in Thai, "lies athwart your ears." In other words, it doesn't go smoothly into your ears; it gets stuck there. Don't let it get stuck, because what is it that gets it stuck? The narratives you tell yourself: "I don't like hearing people say this and I don't like them doing that." As the Buddha said, try to depersonalize it: "An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear." When the sound ends, that's it.

And keep in mind that the people who are coming here are coming with meritorious intentions. That makes it a lot easier to deal with whatever you don't like. But still, even when their intentions are not good, you have to look after your own ears; you have to look after your own eyes, nose, tongue, body, mind. These are your responsibilities. And ideally, whatever comes up at the six senses is something that you want to be able to deal with skillfully.

Now, to maintain the equanimity we need in order to deal with these things, it's not just enough to remind yourself to be equanimous. You've got to have a good foundation inside, and this is where the meditation comes in. You want to be able to create a state of being still, or at least have a still center here in the mind and be very good at maintaining it. We'll have practice tomorrow as we're setting up the place. As you're doing the work, make sure that your still center stays still. The image the Buddha gives is of a man carrying a bowl of oil on his head, and the bowl is filled to the brim with oil. Right behind him is another man with a raised sword. If the first man drops even one drop of oil, the second man is going to cut off his head. Meanwhile, the first man is walking between, on one side, a beauty

queen who is singing and dancing and, on the other side, a crowd that's really excited about the beauty queen. The beauty queen, of course, stands for all the things outside that you want to look at and listen to, and the crowd stands for your reactions. You want to maintain this sense of still center in between, so that you don't get distracted by the beauty queen and you don't get distracted by the crowd.

You know what you've got to do. First priority: Don't spill any drop of oil. And fortunately, you don't have a man with a raised sword behind you. But it's good to keep that image in mind in case you get careless. You're looking after something that only you can look after. And if you're careless now, what's it going to be like when you leave the monastery? What's it going to be like when you get out and do all your other activities? It's not going to be just one drop of oil. The whole bowl will get spilled over. You don't even know where the bowl is anymore, you don't know where the oil is anymore, and that's no help. You want to learn how to develop at least some sense of still center inside so that when there are pains in the body, when painful words are being said, you can maintain your equanimity, you can maintain your patience.

This is how we develop the strength of equanimity and patience: not by just sitting there, gritting our teeth and bearing with it, but by developing a sense of goodwill for ourselves and a sense of well-being inside. Focus not on what's difficult, but focus on the good things you've got going, and use your heedfulness as the man with the raised sword.

Remind yourself that things are going to get a lot more difficult than this as life goes on, and if you spill your oil just over a few words that someone else said, what's it going to be like when you meet up with aging, illness, and death? You'll have no oil at all.

So try to look after this bowl of oil while you're here with your eyes closed and, as you get up and move around, try to have that sense of balance inside, stillness inside—so that when you're be dealing with all the people we'll be dealing with this weekend, it won't be with a sense of frustration. You're coming from a position of strength, a position of well-being and you're happy to see other people make merit in their way. That helps keep everything in balance.