

In the Eyes of the Wise

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There's a story of a student of a Zen teacher from the Midwest who was going to come out to LA to try his hand at the entertainment industry, and his teacher asked him, "If you go out there and they knock you down, what are you going to do?" And the student said, "Well, I guess I'll have to accept it." And the teacher said, "No. They knock you down, you come back up. They knock you down again, you come back up again."

This is the attitude you have to take as a meditator. When things don't go well, you have to get back up on your feet and do your best. This applies to the meditation and to your life outside as well. After all, we're working on our own well-being here and we can't let other people get in the way of that. That doesn't mean that our well-being has to trample over their well-being, but it does mean that we can't let their idea of well-being trample over ours, because after all, we are living in a land of wrong view.

Even over in Asia, where there are cultures that have been living with Buddhism for hundreds of years, all too often when you step outside of the monastery you're stepping into a land of wrong view too. I know a number of people in Thailand who complained to me about this. They worked in the government, they worked in business, and they made the point to try to be as fair and as moral as possible in their work, but sometimes their fellow workers would say, "Why don't you just go back to the monastery?"

And even in monasteries, it's not the case that everybody around you is going to have right view. People have all kinds of views. And even when you're surrounded by people who have right view and right practice, you still have to be a self-starter. They can't do the work for you. This means that wherever you go as a practitioner, you've made up your mind that this is something you want to stick to, because it's your decision and you know the decision is right.

I have a student who was going across Russia one time on the Trans-Siberian Railway and stopped near Lake Baikal. He'd been sitting there in the train going across those vast expanses, reflecting on human life—both what he saw around him and what he had left behind in the States—and he arrived at an overwhelming sense that there are very few people in the world who have a good moral attitude. He found it depressing, but then he realized, "I can at least be a moral person myself, regardless of what other people think, what other people say, or whatever they believe. I can make that my decision." And that decision gave him a sense of energy, a sense of honor.

So whatever way you find of motivating yourself to start with the practice and maintain the practice, it's all to the good. And then, in maintaining it, it's not just a matter of motivation. You also need to have some skills. This is what we work on as we meditate. We try to get a sense of what it means to have the mind really balanced—so that it's not leaning under the power of its likes or its dislikes, or under the power of its delusions or fears.

As the Buddha said, there are four ways that the mind gets biased: leaning under the influence of things you like, things you dislike, things you're deluded about, or things you're afraid of. You don't want the mind to be leaning in any of those directions. You want it to stand straight and tall. Balanced. And part of it comes from the conviction and trust that what the Buddha taught was right, that it seems reasonable and good. You're going to be testing it and, of course, people will be testing you. But you have to be able to maintain the conviction that this is the right way, because many people have followed this way and they've come back to say, Yes, this is the way to true happiness.

So you can't let yourself get waylaid by other people's random opinions. And you never know: Sometimes your good example can help change them. You've got to have goodwill for everyone around you, even the people who are opposed to your practice or who put obstacles in your way. You can't have ill will for anybody. But that doesn't mean you have to give in to their attitudes.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate: to have the strength to stick with our convictions, to have a sense of well-being inside, because all too often the reason we go after other people's opinions is that there's a kind of well-being that comes from other people's approval, or what we feel is other people's understanding, and that our happiness really depends on them. But as the Buddha said, you can't choose to depend on other people's understanding just because you want to look good in the eyes of everyone around you. You have to be more discerning: You should try to look good in the eyes of the wise. That's how he has you use a sense of honor in the practice.

That's what honor means: having a sense of how you look in other people's eyes, and wanting to look good. Now, honor's gotten a bad name here in the States because of people who feel that their honor is besmirched just because somebody makes a snide comment about them or the people they love, and that they have to defend their honor by killing the person. That's not honor in the Buddha's sense.

As the Buddha saw, the problem with honor is not so much wanting to look good in other people's eyes, but wanting to look good in the wrong people's eyes. He himself had to put up with a lot of people who offered him praise and criticism that led in the wrong direction.

When he studied with his first two teachers, they praised him. They were going to make him a teacher, but he realized that the skills he had learned under them didn't constitute the end of suffering. He wanted to find something better than that, so he didn't let their praise turn his head. He tried the path of extreme austerities for six years but realized that that, too, led to a dead-end and so he abandoned it. The five brethren who had been attending to him during those years criticized him for backsliding, showed a lot of disrespect for him, and left. But he didn't let that turn his head, either. He didn't let himself get swayed by how he looked in anyone's eyes.

Yet once he had found the true way and he established the Sangha of noble disciples who'd also found the true way, he realized that he had established a society of people whose eyes you

really should want to look good in. And in a society like that, a sense of honor can be a useful thing.

You see this in many of his teachings. He taught the Kalamas that when you judge a teaching, you judge it as to the results it leads to when you put it into practice. But you also have to ask: Are the actions inspired by these teachings praised by the wise or criticized by the wise? The opinion of the wise is something to take into consideration. So when he talks about the precepts that are dear to the noble ones, or appealing to the noble ones, those are the precepts you want to follow.

There's even that reflection he gives when your mind is beginning to wander off in ways that it shouldn't. He says to remind yourself that there are people in the world, or devas in the world, who can read minds. What if they're reading your mind right now? What would they think? And it's not as far-fetched as it may sound. Staying with Ajaan Fuang, I had a very strong sense that he could read my mind, which kept me on my toes. And it was really good for my practice.

You know that famous teaching where the Buddha is teaching Rahula. He starts out with the image of the empty dipper: If you tell a lie, your goodness is as empty as this empty dipper. Its goodness has been thrown away just as the water in the dipper has been thrown away. He's basically telling Rahula that this is what you look like in the eyes of the wise if you tell a lie without feeling a sense of shame: empty of goodness. Your goodness has been thrown away.

Then he gives the image of the mirror, and, of course, what is a mirror for if not to see how we look to other people? And here the Buddha says you're looking in the mirror of the wise, to see not how your face looks, but how your actions look. When wise people are looking at you, that's what they look at. They don't look at your personal appearance. They look at your actions.

But before that, he gives the image of the elephant in battle. It fights with its fore feet and it fights with its back feet, it fights with its tusks, but it holds its trunk back. The elephant trainer sees that and he says to himself, "The elephant hasn't given his life to the king." But if the elephant fights with its fore feet and its back feet and its tusks *and* its trunk, then the elephant trainer knows, "Okay, this elephant has given his life to the king. There's nothing it won't do."

Now, at first glance the image sounds as if the elephant who's not protecting his trunk is the one you would admire. He's really given himself over to the battle, because after all, that's what kings look for in their elephants. But actually the image of the elephant who holds his trunk back is the one the Buddha admires. In other words, if you maintain your sense of truthfulness in all situations, regardless, that's when you're following his teachings. And if you maintain your truthfulness regardless of what other people want out of you, you're nobody's servant. After all, the elephant who's willing to risk his trunk for the king is the servant of the king. But when you practice the Dhamma, you're nobody's servant.

Ajaan Fuang made this comment many, many times: “We’re nobody’s servant,” he would say. “Nobody hired us to practice. Nobody even hired us to be born. We came of our own free will.” So when we see the practice is a good thing, we stick with it and we don’t abandon it to be a slave to anyone’s opinion.

So it’s a point of honor to stick with the practice even though the people around you don’t appreciate the fact that you’re truthful, that you have goodwill, that you’re generous and virtuous, and that you’re doing your best to train the mind. How you look in their eyes doesn’t really matter. Just keep in mind how you would look in the eyes of the wise. Because, after all, those are the people whose club you want to join—you want to become a wise person, too.

It’s like Ajaan Mun, when he was accused of not following Thai customs: eating only one meal a day, living in the forest, wearing robes that were made up of scraps. People would say, “You’re not behaving in line with Thai customs or Laotian customs.” And he’d respond, “I’m behaving in line with the customs of the noble ones. If you want to become a noble one, you have to follow their customs.”

In the same way, if you want to be wise, you start by trying to look good in the eyes of the wise. That sense of honor is something that really can help keep you on the path. Now, that alone won’t do it. It has to be augmented by your concentration, because after all, if you’re going to give up the satisfaction of being admired by the people around you, you have to have something inside to keep you nourished. This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration, so that we can have a sense of well-being that we can tap into, that we can draw on, so that it can sustain us, regardless of what other people say.

So remember, you started out on this path of your own free will, so try to stay on the path of your own free will, because it’s a good path. You don’t want that original decision to be wiped out by anyone else’s opinions. When you know that what you’re doing is good and harmless, that’s what you hold onto. That’s how we survive in this land of wrong view. Not only survive, but thrive in the best sense of the word.