

The Brightness of Life

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Back when Western scholars were first learning about Buddhism, some of them went to Asia after reading some of the texts. All they had seen in the texts were suffering, suffering, suffering, and impermanence. So they expected Asian Buddhists to be pretty depressed. But they found that they were actually very happy. And their original conclusion was that Asian Buddhists didn't know their own religion very well.

The scholars felt superior because they'd been reading the books. They assumed that the people in Asia were illiterate. We now know a lot better, though, because after all, when the Buddha talks about suffering it's not simply to let you stay in suffering. It's to help you find a way out. That's the only reason he talked about the topic. As he said, if you couldn't develop skillful qualities, it wouldn't have been worth his while to teach. And if skillful qualities didn't lead to true happiness, it wouldn't have been worth his while to teach. So the teaching is all about skillful actions leading to happiness.

When the Buddha talks about suffering, when he talks about impermanence and inconstancy, he doesn't want to leave you there. He says that these are problems, but there are solutions. And he shows you the solutions. That's what the four noble truths are all about.

This is why we're practicing concentration: to get the mind in shape so that it can master those solutions in the full conviction that, as Ajaan Fuang says, we can find the brightness of life. That was his comment about what he owed to Ajaan Lee. He said it was because of Ajaan Lee that he found the brightness of life. It's good to keep this in mind. The funny thing, though, is that scholars keep going back to the original proposition that Buddhism should be all about suffering and impermanence and leave it there.

I was reading just this evening a book in which the author was saying that this is what's really good about the Buddhist tradition: that its depiction of reality faces the reality that there is suffering and there's impermanence. And then, the author proposes, everything else in the Buddhist tradition should be thrown out as giving too many pat answers. Those other things don't leave you to have your own direct confrontation with this reality, he said—as if leaving you without any tools was going to be of service.

I ran into this same line of thought a couple of weeks back when someone was saying that there are people out there who say that if you approach the present

moment with particular ideas about what you're going to find there, then of course, it's going to determine what you find. Your agenda would shape what you would get out of the present moment—as if that were a bad thing.

Somehow there's this idea that what we want is just a naked experience of the present and that that, in and of itself, will be meaningful or valuable or whatever. But again, if you approach the present moment without any idea of what you're going to find there, who knows what you're going to find and whether it's going to be worthwhile or not.

The Buddha describes the present moment to help you know: These are the problems in the present moment, but these are the solutions. That's why he talks about not bare attention or bare awareness. He talks about *appropriate* attention, where you come into the present moment armed with some knowledge about the questions to ask to get happiness out of the present moment.

Appropriate attention starts with the distinction between skillful and unskillful qualities. The Buddha lists them. His list helps you figure out how to recognize them so that you don't get sucked into the unskillful ones, because that's all too often what happens: We get into a bad mood. We get into an unskillful state of mind. We get into a defilement and it's going to pull us in its direction. If we don't have a clear idea of the direction we want, it's very easy just to go along with the flow. But that term, "going along with the flow," corresponds to what in Thai they called *yathakam*, which means simply flowing along in whatever direction your past karma flows—and it tends to flow down.

So we do come into the present moment with an agenda: We want to figure out where the problem is and what the solution is. That book I was reading today was saying that the teachings about the four noble truths, dependent co-arising, emptiness should all be thrown out because the answers they give are too pat. Well, the answers are good answers. They work. They give you tools for understanding what you're going to find here, how to take it apart. If you get yourself into an unskillful state of becoming, they tell you how to get out by giving you some clues as to how becomings are formed: They're formed through fabrication.

You can look at fabrication in terms of the five aggregates. You can look at it in terms of the three kinds of fabrication that are listed in dependent co-arising. This kind of knowledge helps get you out of that state. You see the state of becoming not in terms of narratives about who you are in the world that you're confronting, but simply, "Oh, these are events in the mind." That insight pulls you out of the narratives into learning to look at the workings of your mind, because that's where the problem is.

Remember, the Buddha didn't say the problem is suffering out there. The problem is the clinging in the mind. It's something the mind is doing, and you want to see the process. So he gives you these tools. This is where you look for the clinging: in the aggregates, in the different forms of fabrication, first in areas where it's really obvious—when there's greed or aversion—and then in the less obvious areas, where there's delusion. He gives you the tools for taking these things apart and for understanding them and getting beyond them. That's the whole point of this: We're going beyond just confronting things. We even go beyond the path.

There's a passage where the Buddha's talking about how you deal with defilements. You see them in terms of their origination—in other words, what causes them—while it's happening. You see them as they pass away. You look for their allure: why you like them. You look for the drawbacks, and then you develop dispassion when you see that the drawbacks far outweigh the allure. The dispassion is what provides the escape. And the interesting thing is the Buddha applies this analysis not only to defilements, but also to factors of the path.

There's a way he formulates the path in terms of the five faculties: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. He says you don't really know these five faculties until you've seen their origination, their passing away, their allure, their drawbacks, and the escape from them. So even the path is something we're ultimately going to be putting aside. That's the brightness of life: the point where you can put aside the path, where it's delivered you.

So we've got these tools that the Buddha's offered us, even though there may be people who don't want to make use of them. They say, "I'd rather suffer the problem on my own." It's like a doctor who comes and says "Here's the disease and here's the medicine. Here's the treatment for it." And some people say, "No, I'd rather find my own treatment." The question is, you look at the doctor: He's cured a lot of people in the past. Why bother finding your own treatment? Try his. But he won't do the work for you. The treatment will involve developing your own ingenuity and your own discernment.

At the very least, you don't have to keep re-inventing the Dhamma wheel, because all too often, the re-invented Dhamma wheels aren't even round. They're all crooked and distorted. They don't go anywhere, or if they do go anywhere, they fall down. So remember, the Buddha was a really good doctor. And we have this illness. But we're not just going to sit there and say, "I'm going to confront this illness on its own terms on my own without any help." That's like someone being surrounded by doctors and saying, "Nope, I do this on my own." And remember, those doctors are the people who are happy in their practice of Buddhism. The

reason they're happy is because the practice has directed them to the right questions, and shown them how and where to find the answers.

We're all born into this world with problems. We're all born in this world with suffering. And what makes us happy is that we can find a way out of that suffering. This is how those Buddhists were happy—the Buddhists that mystified the scholars. It was the scholars who didn't really understand.

The Buddha talks about suffering because he has a cure for it. And that's the good news of the teaching. This is what attracted me to Ajaan Fuang. He was living, at that time, in a very poor area. The monastery was very poor. But he was the first genuinely happy person I'd ever met. And, as he explained to me, it wasn't that he was born that way. He also struck me as very wise, but he said he wasn't born wise. It was all through the training. It was because of his happiness that I was attracted to studying with him. And I've always been glad I did.