

Free Like a Wild Deer

June 25, 2019

Start with thoughts of goodwill for all beings. Goodwill is our protection. Sometimes you hear people saying that as meditators we should let ourselves be vulnerable. What that means—or what it should mean—is that we have to think of our old defenses, realize how poorly they work, and try the Buddha’s defenses instead. In the beginning we may feel vulnerable because we’re not protecting ourselves in the old ways, and it takes a certain amount of trust.

Think of the ajans going into the forest. Before, when they were lay people, they would take their weapons with them. But then as monks they were going totally unarmed, and their protection was taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha: in other words, trying to develop the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, in their hearts, in their activities. And they learned over time that that really was a much more solid protection: the protection of being inoffensive, the protection of being unburdensome, the protection of having goodwill for all.

The Buddha puts those two ideas together: being unburdensome and having goodwill. They go together because if you have a lot of demands for your comfort, a lot of demands for your ideas of how much is enough, you have to remember the Buddha’s vision that the world is full of things that belong to other people. He said he looked around and found nothing that was not already laid claim to. So if you’re looking for happiness in those terms, you’re going to have to fight. Whereas if you can keep your needs as frugal as possible and look for your happiness inside, then you’re showing compassion both for others and for yourself. You’ve found the qualities of mind that come with contentment and frugality. They’re much more nourishing for the mind than having a lot of things, and they don’t involve fighting with anyone else.

So, try to make your wisdom the wisdom of qualities of the mind instead of the wisdom of things—knowing this thing is that way and that thing is this way—and try to learn what are the qualities the Buddha is talking about when he’s talking about contentment.

He explains it in his discussion of the traditions of the noble ones. You’re content with food, clothing, and shelter, but at the same time you don’t brag about the fact that you’re content. You don’t make a big show of it and you don’t look down at others who are not as content as you are. As the Buddha said, you see dangers in your consumption of things, two kinds of dangers. One, the danger

that comes when you feel that you need to have a lot of things, along with the danger of looking down on other people who don't have as much as you do. But two, there's the danger that comes if you look down on people who are not as content as you are.

So, if you look at your material needs, you learn that you don't need as much as you thought you did. By coming out in the woods like this, we've found that it's actually liberating to live very basically. It takes more time, it takes some energy, and it takes some skills. But if you're willing to put in the energy and develop the skills, you find that the mind is light. The Buddha himself once said that his real happiness in life was being alone. He said even when he was out urinating and defecating alone, he was happy.

So, it's good to think about that. It's one of the passages in the Buddha's teachings you don't hear that often but it does point to the fact that simply meeting our needs in as simple way as possible can be very enjoyable, reflecting on the burdens that come when you are not content.

Think of Ven. Bhaddiya sitting under a tree exclaiming, "What bliss, what bliss!" The monks were concerned. He had been a king before, maybe he was thinking about his bliss as a king, and so they informed the Buddha, and the Buddha called him in. I think the Buddha knew what Bhaddiya was thinking, but he wanted the monks to hear. He asked him, "What are you thinking when you say, 'What bliss, what bliss'?" And Bhaddiya says, "I think about the time when I was a king, and even though I had guards posted inside and outside the palace, inside and outside the city, inside and outside the country, still I couldn't sleep. I was constantly waking up in fear. But now I sit under a tree. Whatever few needs I have are met through the generosity of others. My mind is free, like that of a wild deer." That's the bliss he was thinking about.

So, think of the bliss of seclusion, the bliss of frugality, the bliss of contentment when you're close to nature. And that can really be sustenance on the path.

Now, those traditions of the noble ones don't stop with contentment. After reading the first three—being content with whatever food, clothing, and shelter you get—you might think the fourth one would be being content with whatever medicine you get, but no, that's not the case. It's finding delight in developing and delight in abandoning. Here the Buddha's talking about skillful and unskillful qualities in the mind. Taking delight in developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones means that you're not simply content with whatever level of skill you have. This is the area where the Buddha actually encourages you *not* to be content. If you see something in the mind that's not skillful, you try to

make it your sport seeing how to let go of it and how to develop something skillful in its place. Notice that word, “delight.” You do make it your sport. You don’t regard it as a chore. You don’t regard it as a duty. You regard it as something you delight in doing, seeing that your mind can improve and seeing all the good things that come as you develop skillful qualities: all the skillful things that come when you abandon unskillful qualities.

You notice as you read through the teachings of the ajaans, a huge percentage of the Dhamma talks are pep talks. Encouragement. It’s all too easy when you’re under difficult circumstances to think about how much better you’d like it to be this way or that way. But the ajaans are there to remind you to think about the good things you do have, not so much in terms of the material things, but in terms of good opportunities to practice. These opportunities don’t come if you’re spending all your time trying to become as wealthy as possible, or as famous as possible, or as powerful as possible. The good things of the mind come when you pare down your concern for material things, you pare down your concern for the world outside and your position in the world outside, and you focus more on what good qualities you can develop. Sometimes you develop these qualities in the context of society at large, and sometimes you develop them when you’re out in seclusion. But they are the real food for the mind.

And they are the happiness that doesn’t have anybody laying claim to it. You’re free to be as generous as you want. No one else can lay claim to generosity. You’re free to be as virtuous as you want. No one’s laid claim to virtue. You’re free to develop your meditation. No one else has laid claim to your mind and your meditation. This is an area where the opportunities are wide open—so that maybe one day your mind, too, can be free like a wild deer.