

## *Be Heedful & Think*

*February 17, 2021*

They tell the story of Ajaan Mun staying in caves and shrines in the forest where other monks had stayed and died, whereas he survived. He attributed that to his heedfulness. In some cases, it was fairly simple. He'd learned from Ajaan Sao that you had to be very careful when you stayed in the forest. Diseases were all around, and there was no medicine, or very little, so you had to be very careful about making sure that you didn't get sick from your own carelessness.

I remember reading about someone visiting Ajaan Sao in a part of the forest in the Northeast that was reputed to have a lot of malaria. He'd stayed there for several months and did not get malaria. The person recounting this didn't attribute this to Ajaan Sao's special powers aside from his carefulness: knowing what times to go out and what times to stay in his net, knowing to boil his water—in other words, being heedful.

In some places, Ajaan Mun attributed the fact that he was able to survive to the fact that he'd followed the Vinaya carefully. Sometimes the devas of the spot would appear to him and tell him that previous monks had been there and had been very sloppy in their Vinaya. The devas didn't like that, so they felt no qualms about making life difficult for those monks. But with Ajaan Mun, they admired his adherence to the Vinaya.

It's good to remember when you go out in the forest and into the wilderness that you're being watched. So behave like you're being watched. For me, this was always an important part of staying at Wat Dhammasathit. There was always this feeling that someone was watching me. Whether it was Ajaan Fuang—who, I was convinced, could read minds—or somebody else, I don't know. But it kept me on my toes.

When you think that nobody knows, nobody cares, after a while, you start pretending like you don't know and you don't care. That destroys your meditation, because meditation is largely a matter of being very careful. After all, you're going to try to see subtle things in the mind and you won't see them when you're sloppy. You won't see them when your attitude is, "It doesn't matter."

Everything matters. Remember the Buddha's teachings on what it means to be a person of integrity. There are seven qualities in all, and only one of them has to do with knowing the Dhamma. The rest have to do with being observant—for instance, knowing the meaning. When I first learned this, I thought this was simply a matter of learning how to translate difficult terms into easy terms. But

the word *attha*, which means meaning, can also mean goal or purpose. What is this Dhamma for? Ultimately, all the Dhamma is for the sake of release.

As the Buddha said, the Dhamma has one taste all the way through, just as the ocean has one taste, the taste of salt. The taste of the Dhamma is the taste of release. Now, the word “taste” there relates to an Indian aesthetic concept: the idea that when you watch a play or listen to a poem, you taste what’s being portrayed. That’s what you can take away. If they’re portraying someone going through a particular feeling, you don’t *experience* the feeling of that person. You *taste* the feeling, which is something different. If someone is being heroic, they’re not thinking about the fact that they’re being heroic. But you taste that. In the same way, the Dhamma’s there for you to take the taste of release to remind yourself, “That’s what it’s all about.”

And what are you gaining release from? From your own carelessness. That’s a lot of what the four noble truths come down to. You’ve been allowing yourself to think in ways that lead to suffering, and you’ve been doing it for so long that you don’t really see the connection between what you’re doing and the suffering, because the suffering is so constant. But if you learn how to be careful, then when a desire comes into the mind, you can ask yourself, “If I acted on this desire, where would it take me?” You start thinking about the consequences and you begin to make distinctions: which consequences are preferable. That’s when you’re starting to be careful.

The idea that we’re here for the appreciation of the Oneness of everything—that’s one of the most careless teachings you can think of. It’s when you make distinctions that you begin to realize there are certain areas where you have to be very careful. This is an important lesson. It carries from the wilderness over into every aspect of the practice.

The other aspect of being in the wilderness, aside from being heedful, is learning how to use your ingenuity. You don’t have all the conveniences that you had before when you lived at home, so you have to learn how to make do, how to thrive in new circumstances. And that requires that you think.

There’s a famous passage in the Vinaya about the time when Moggallana and Sariputta had both become stream enterers having heard the Dhamma. Sariputta had heard it from Ven. Assaji. Moggallana had heard it from Sariputta. They decided they had to go see the Buddha. So they went to see their teacher to say goodbye, and they invited him to go along. He didn’t go along. In the Commentary’s version of the story, he said, “The Buddha’s teaching is something very subtle. Only people of intelligence will appreciate it. My teaching is dumb.

Anybody can appreciate it. I'm more likely to have followers if I continue with this dumb teaching."

He was right in that the Dhamma does require thought. It requires that you look at what you're doing, reflect on it, see distinctions. If you come up with a problem, you're going to have to solve it. Part of the practice lies in having the confidence that you're not going to come up with any problems that haven't been faced by people on the path before. Somebody has gotten past this problem. There must a way around it. Then use your ingenuity to figure out how they did it.

The Thai ajaans like to use the word *sati-pañña*. *Sati* means mindfulness. *Pañña* means discernment. And the combination in Thai means intelligence. It goes together with another Pali word, *patibhāna*, that Ajaan Fuang liked to use a lot. In Thai it's *patiphaan*, and it means using your ingenuity, using your imagination.

When you come up against an obstacle, how can you get around it? Is it an obstacle you have to go through? Is it an obstacle you have to go around? Is it an obstacle that you've made? How did you make it? If you see that something is simply like a rock in your path, it's going to limit your range of solutions. You have to you yourself, "What did I do to make this?" That's the message of the four noble truths. You've been making the problems. So it's a question of catching yourself in the act.

When I first started out with the Ajaan Lee method, there was a period when I found myself getting really tense. The breath seemed very harsh. I couldn't figure out why until I realized that the very moment when I decided that I was going to focus on the breath, I would tense up the little tiny muscles in the blood vessels. Once that tension got in place, it was hard to get it out. But once I saw myself in the act of doing it, I could undo it, and the breath would flow naturally.

So look to see where you're causing the problem. The problems that get in the way of getting the mind to settle down, that get in the way of seeing things for what they are, come from something you're doing. Often it's something you're not aware you're doing, which is why you have to think, ask questions, and turn the questions inside out.

If you want to get unexpected answers, which is what we're looking for, sometimes you have to ask some unexpected questions. So the practice of the Dhamma's not simply a matter of doing as you're told. In some areas, as with the precepts, we abide by them. But there's so much that's not covered by the precepts.

You have to look at yourself and ask yourself, "What am I doing?" Learn to look at issues from many angles. Ajaan Suwat told this story one time. Two

different ajaans: One, Ajaan Funn, who was his own ajaan, and another ajaan both had to build dams in their monasteries. Ajaan Funn built his so that it was higher than the land around it, whereas the other ajaan was at a monastery in the mountains, so he couldn't do that. But he didn't think of building a spillway. In both cases, both dams were flooded at one point. Ajaan Funn's dam survived, because when the water got high, it didn't have to go through the dam. It went around it, whereas the other ajaan's dam was destroyed. Ajaan Suwat told this story not to brag about Ajaan Funn, but to point out that you have to use your intelligence. You have to think about things, be prepared, anticipate different problems before they arise. That's what it means to use your *sati-pañña*, to use your intelligence.

So those two qualities—heedfulness and intelligence—are always good to think about as you go in the forest, as you go in the wilderness, and as you're staying here meditating. It's good to bring the lessons of the wilderness into areas that are not wild because the lessons still apply. Your actions do make a difference wherever you are, so you have to be careful.

The problems of the mind are caused by things you're doing that you don't know you're doing. That's what ignorance means. So you have to figure out how to get yourself more sensitive to what you're doing. This is where you exercise your intelligence.

The purpose of all this, of course, is more than to simply survive in the wilderness. It's to get the mind to thrive. Some people complain all this attention to minutiae seems to put a straightjacket around their minds. But actually it's liberating. It frees you from the mind's abstractions. It frees you from the mind's ignorance. You focus on things that are right before your eyes, you look at them carefully, and you're careful about your choices. In doing so, you get to taste the meaning, the purpose of the Dhamma, because sometimes it's in the little things that you're going to find release.