

The Flamethrowing Mind

September 4, 2023

As the passage that we chanted just now said, everything is on fire. Where do the flames come from? From inside the mind. The mind is a flamethrower. It scorches everything we look at, listen to, smell, taste, touch, think about. And then we complain that things are hot. We have to look around and see, why are we putting things on fire? Look here for the problem. If we can put out the fire here, then nothing outside is going to be on fire at all.

Ajaan Lee has an interesting point that he makes in his talk on consciousnesses, that when the mind gets freed, everything else gets freed as well. Ajaan MahaBoowa makes the same point. He says we've been stealing things from the world, trying to make them ours. Then, as the case is being adjudicated, the fact that everything else is stolen goods taints them. But when we remove the taints from our own mind, the world outside is not tainted, either.

This is not to say that there are not a lot of problems out in the world. The world seems to be crazy right now. People are actually planning wars as if war were something reasonable. So we do live in a world that's not the best place to be. But, we can practice, we can cleanse our minds, we can put out the fires inside so, at the very least, we don't have to suffer from things outside.

As we learn how not to suffer, we can help other people not to suffer, too. Sometimes we're told that Theravadins are selfish, looking after their own question of suffering without trying to save the rest of the world. Well, you can't save other people. People suffer because of their own lack of skill. You can't make somebody else skillful, but you can show people that it is possible to behave in a skillful way. It's like the ways in which manual skills develop.

Back in the time of the Enlightenment, they made an encyclopaedia. And the encyclopaedia had a lot of articles on the manual skills that people were using, and tried to bring some scientific knowledge to them. Once scientific knowledge came to one craftsperson, other people in the same craft picked it up. They saw, "This is possible. This can be done." Sometimes they'd learn it from the first person, sometimes from the simple fact that the first person had done something like that. Others would look at what he had done and try to figure out, "How did he do that?"

Like Ajaan Lee in India: The first time he went there, he was amazed to see the sadhus standing on one leg out in the sun all day long or lying down on beds of nails. The question came to his mind, "How do they do that?" He didn't ask them. He looked into his own meditation. And the message he got

was that they worked with the breath energies in the body. So he decided to work with his own.

So sometimes the fact simply that somebody can do something inspires other people to do it. They figure out that this is a possibility that hadn't occurred to them before, but once it does occur to them, they figure it out. This is one way in which we help the world. We figure out how we're setting things on fire and we can put out the fires. Then other people see, "Oh, that's possible." It hadn't occurred to them before. That possibility hadn't presented itself to their awareness. But when it's there, it sets a good example. So we're looking for happiness in a way that doesn't harm anybody and can inspire other people to look for happiness in the right way, too.

But the first thing we've got to do is to put our own house in order. How are we setting fire to things? We want them to be a certain way, and then they're not that way. Or if they are that way, we want them to stay that way. If they're not the way we want them, we're upset. This habit we have of trying to take things and then make something else out of them is how we learn how to be beings to begin with. But then we apply it in a lot of the wrong places.

Think about the process of becoming. It starts out with some pretty unpromising raw materials: feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, acts of consciousness—very simple things that are not very lasting. In fact, they're very ephemeral. Yet we want to create a sense of our identity as a solid thing we can depend on, and the world as something we can depend on. And we do a fairly good job—good enough, at least, that we can deceive ourselves. We try to forget that the raw materials are very, very, ephemeral. We're proud of the fact that we can make something out of them. But then when they prove recalcitrant and don't play along, we get upset.

So you've got to look back into the mind's habit of taking something and trying to make something else out of it, and ask yourself, "Where's the problem?" Here again, the problem comes from within. We're trying to make some reliable out of unreliable things. If we could learn how to stop doing that, we wouldn't suffer.

So you have to look at that pattern we have inside: what we want to make things into. There's something wrong there. We may be perfectly right that things would be better if they could be something else, but if they don't lend themselves to be that something else, then who's wrong, who's right?

Ajaan Chah tells the story of four people going into the woods and they hear a cock crow. Three of them put their heads together and say, "Let's have a little fun." They ask the question, "What is that? Is that a cock or a hen?" The other guy says, "Well, of course, it's a cock. It doesn't sound like a hen at all. How could a hen make a sound like that?" They say, "Well, hens have mouths. They can make sounds." So they argue back and forth, and the one guy is

outnumbered by the three who are having some fun, and he gets all upset. As Ajaan Chah points out, he was right, but his rightness got him upset. Is it worth it? As for the animal that made the noise, if you asked it, “Are you a cock or are you a hen?” it wouldn’t answer.

So there are a lot of things in the world where, yes, you are right, things would be better if they were different from what they are. And there are some occasions when you can make them different from what they are. A lot of times, though, you can’t. It’s a real skill to learn how to live in the world and see where you can make a difference and where you can’t, and not get upset about the areas where you can’t.

You find more and more that the important differences are the differences you can make in your own mind. After all, that’s where the big problem is. The mind is on fire. If the mind were not on fire, nothing else outside would be on fire; none of the senses would be on fire. So this is where you focus your efforts to put out the fire: to see what you’re feeding on, what you’re clinging to.

I’ve been looking into the question of the meanings of the words *mind* and *consciousness* and *awareness* in the Pali Canon, and it turns out that in different suttas, they mean different things. It’s as if the Buddha gives us several different maps for analysing our minds. In some cases, consciousness is just the passive registering of sensory input. In other cases, it’s more active. It’s actually proactive. It gets obsessed with things. It gets attached to things. What we normally think of as the activities of the mind are sometimes attributed to consciousness. The mind gets released, and even consciousness gets released in a couple of suttas.

So you could say the Buddha was inconsistent in his terminology, or you could say that he was offering different ways of analysing what’s going on in your mind, all of which are useful for dividing things up, until you can see that none of them are worthy of passion: the passion that wants to make something out of them.

You can learn to do that with your own mind. When the mind is freed, then, as Ajaan Lee says, everything else gets freed too. When you put out the fires here and stop throwing flames outside, everything cools down. Everything is at peace.

The constant theme through all this is dispassion. When you can learn to develop dispassion for these different processes that you’ve enjoyed so much, then however you analyse them, as long as you have dispassion for everything, you’re doing fine. There are even passages that say when you have an experience of the deathless, you can have passion for that. So, you have to learn how to have dispassion for that too. Ajaan Lee, when he divides things up, says that some things are subject to the three characteristics, and other things are

not. But that doesn't mean you hold on to the ones that are not. Everything should be let go of.

That's where we're headed. That's how you put out the fires inside. In the meantime, though, you need to have some passion for the path. A question came up this afternoon about someone who's found that as she's advanced on the path, she's found herself less and less interested in the things that used to hold a lot of interest for her. She's afraid she's going to suffer depression. Well, depression comes from a sense of powerlessness, that your actions don't matter, whereas dispassion comes from seeing that the things that you used to find rewarding don't really hold any reward. In the meantime, though, you've learned that there *are* things where you can make a difference. You can make a difference in your mind. You can put out the fires, stop throwing flames. And that's something you can get passionate about as you practice.

Ultimately, you get dispassionate for that insight, too. You get dispassionate for everything. But at that point, it's not depression because you've found the ultimate happiness, where everything can be at peace. Until you get there, though, you're going to be finding that not only is the mind not at peace, but the world is not at peace because you're not at peace. The important thing is that you watch out for the areas where you're setting things on fire. As you put out the fires inside, things in the world cool down. The mind cools down.

That's where we're headed. As the Buddha said, if you see that goal as something unattractive, you've got wrong view. The closer you get there, the more you appreciate that you're really headed in the right direction.

In the meantime, watch out for the flames and be very careful not to put everybody else on fire, too.