

A Well-Thatched Roof

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There's a short verse in the Canon where a monk's sitting in his hut during a rainstorm and saying, "My hut is well-thatched, so go ahead and rain as much as you'd like." That's a symbol for a mind that's well trained. It can deal with any situation. No matter how good or how bad things are outside, the mind is protected. The good and bad things can't penetrate it.

The Pali term for those things outside is *loka-dhamma*, the dhammas of the world. Most people's minds are not simply penetrated by these things; they're totally flooded, totally overwhelmed. Gain, loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, and pain: These things are constantly raining down on us, and most people are out in the open totally exposed, with no protection at all, thinking that gain must be good; loss must be bad; status is good; loss of status is bad; praise is good; criticism is bad; pleasure is good; pain is bad. So the mind is totally overwhelmed by whatever comes its way, hoping that the good things will last and the bad things will stay away. It's trying to dodge the bad raindrops and gather up the good ones.

But as we all know, these good and bad things come in pairs. And none of them last forever. They keep changing. This is why we need to train the mind so that we can separate ourselves from them, so that we can have the well-thatched roof that protects us from the rain, and the well-sealed walls that protect us from the wind.

Part of the process is just learning to get yourself inside the hut: in other words, learning how not to identify with the dhammas of the world. There's a great story that Ajaan Fuang once told. He was out in the woods and, as evening fell, he set up his umbrella tent: basically an umbrella with a mosquito net hanging from it. Now, when you set up your umbrella tent as a forest monk, you make a vow that once you've set it up you're not going to move. You're not going to relocate no matter what—which means that you have to be very careful before you set it up. You check the weather. You look all around the area to see if there are any ants or other insects that might bother you. Only then do you set up your umbrella tent. Now, that evening, he said, he saw no clouds at all in the sky, so he figured it'd be a nice night to stay out in the open. In a case like that, you run a line from one tree to another. You hang your tent from the line.

Then in the middle of night, he didn't know where it came from, but a huge storm blew up. So he immediately gathered all of his robes except for his lower robe, and put them in his bowl so they'd stay dry. And then he just sat there wearing one lower robe, as the cold wind and rain blew in through the mosquito netting. The theme of his meditation was, "The body may be wet but the mind isn't wet. The body may be wet but the mind isn't wet." And staying with that theme, he was able to get the mind to settle down and be still: to stay "not wet" throughout the night. In other words, he didn't dwell on the theme of the wetness out there or the wetness of his body—in terms of identifying with things outside, the body counts as "outside" as well. He didn't take the wetness into his mind. That's how he got through the night.

So an important part of protecting yourself from the rain of the world is learning how not to identify with things that are subject to gain and loss, status and loss of status. Don't make them part of your self-identity. Learn how to see them simply as *loka-dhammas*, aspects of the world. They're not aspects of your mind. If you don't identify with them, you're not exposed to them. That's when you can learn how to use them wisely, for they can be tools, all of them. The usefulness of gain, status, praise, and pleasure is obvious, although we usually don't use them very skillfully, which means that we don't get much actual goodness out of them. When gain comes, people tend to identify with it. They make it part of their self-image and do unskillful things with it, rather than seeing it as something of the world that has temporarily come their way.

The wise question to ask when gain comes your way is, "How are you going to squeeze the best use out of it?" This doesn't mean squeezing as much pleasure as you can. It means squeezing what is actually useful. How can you use your gains to train your mind? What's the best way to be generous with them? What's the most discerning way to help other people with them? What other good qualities can you derive from using those gains wisely?

When loss comes, what can you learn from that? There are good lessons to be learned from loss, you know, as long as you don't keep your identity all tied up in the loss. One good lesson is, Who are your true friends? Who are the people who are willing to help you even though they can't see any immediate gain coming from it? That's a good lesson to learn. When you're going around wealthy, you don't know who your friends are. You're exposed. I've known people born into extremely wealthy and powerful families. They all seem very wary and uncertain as to whom they can trust—and with good reason. There are always people trying to take advantage of them one way or another. So going through periods of loss is good for sorting out who your friends are. It also teaches you to be ingenious and resourceful in making the most of what few things you do have.

A similar principle applies to status and loss of status. When you gain status, you're gaining in power. What's the best use of that power? In other words, what will give the greatest long-term benefits to yourself and the world at large? When you've lost that status, again you learn who your friends are, and you learn to be resourceful in keeping up your good spirits in spite of the world's disregard.

When praise comes, what's the best use of the praise? It's not to let yourself get all puffed up, thinking that you're already good enough. It's to let you know that your goodness is appreciated; it's to encourage you to keep on doing good and trying to do better.

Criticism, even though we don't like it, tends to be a lot more useful than praise, and for two reasons. One, you may actually learn things about yourself that you otherwise wouldn't know. We tend to be very blind to our weaknesses, our failings, the areas where we really need to do work. Part of us may know, but we figure that as long as nobody else is noticing, it doesn't really matter. So it's good to get criticism to help you realize that people *are* noticing. You've gone out of bounds, or you're lacking something that really does matter. As the Buddha said, when someone points out one of your faults, regard that person as someone who has pointed out treasure. You've got something you can work on.

As for the criticism that's not true, well, you've learned something about the person who criticized you, which is always a useful lesson. It may not be a lesson

you want to learn or like to learn, but it's good to know who has a grudge against you, who is unfair to you. It's a good lesson to learn.

As for pleasure and pain, notice how the Buddha uses them, because they both have their uses. We tend to take pleasure as a goal in and of itself. We want as much pleasure as possible, but this gets us in a lot of trouble. Not that pleasure is bad in and of itself, just that we're pretty indiscriminate in how we relate to pleasures. The Buddha has us sort out which kinds of pleasure are actually harmful and which ones are harmless. The main harmless ones are those based on getting the mind into concentration, because this is a pleasure where you're not in conflict with anybody. When you're sitting here looking at your breath, nobody is trying to elbow you out of the way so that they can hog your breath. It's totally yours. It's an entire field open for you to explore, to reap what pleasure you can.

And that's a very rare kind of pleasure in the world. You're not creating any bad kamma with anybody. You're not creating any unskillful mental states. There may be a slight attachment to the pleasure of concentration, even a strong attachment, but it's a healthy attachment. You sometimes hear warnings about the dangers of concentration, but the danger of concentration lies in wrong concentration: concentration devoid of mindfulness, concentration devoid of alertness, concentration based on ulterior motives—to exert power over others, to win their respect—or wrong view. But concentration as a mental factor in itself is neither good nor bad. The issue is with how much mindfulness and alertness it has, how you understand it, what you're trying to get out of it. That makes all the difference. And the dangers of concentration are much less than the dangers of all the sensual passions we're otherwise attached to.

In the Canon, the Buddha has long, long lists of the dangers of passion for sensual pleasures. But as for the dangers of concentration, you have to search really hard to find a sutta that talks about them. The primary sutta that does simply notes that once you've got your mind in concentration, then when you try to incline it toward letting go of your identity views, the mind may not leap up at the idea of letting go. In other words, you're still attached to the concentration. But again, the fault is not with the concentration, it's with your unwillingness to let it go.

Compare that with the dangers of sensual pleasures and passions: When people are enmeshed in sensual passions their minds certainly don't incline to letting go of identity views. People kill one another over sensual pleasures. We have wars over sensual pleasures. Societies break apart over sensual pleasures. Families break apart. People work themselves to death. Or in their quest for wealth, they push themselves to all sorts of extremes. I've recently been reading about Arctic exploration. The dream of gold up in the Arctic killed who knows how many people. But nobody gets killed over jhana.

So it's a useful pleasure, a healthy pleasure, blameless. It's part of the path. You learn to use this pleasure to get the mind in a position where it can really look into the flip side of pleasure—pain—which the Buddha said is a noble truth. When the mind is well fed with a skillful sense of wellbeing, it's ready for what the Buddha said is the true task with regard to stress and pain, which is to comprehend it. If you're afraid of pain, if you run away from it, if you try to push it away, you're not going to comprehend it. Comprehending comes from looking at it steadily, seeing it for what it is, and seeing where you're still passionate for

things that cause stress, that cause pain. Once you learn how to feel dispassion for those things, that's when you've really comprehended stress. The pleasure of concentration is what allows you to look at pain to the point of comprehending it.

So the important point with regard to all these dhammas of the world is learning how to use them. They do have their uses, as long as you don't identify with them. They are tools you can use. It's like the water of rain. Instead of getting soaked by it, you learn how to take the run-off from the roof and store it in jars; you learn how to build a holding tank or a pond. Then you can use the rainwater to drink, to bathe yourself, to irrigate your crops. Then the water is beneficial. In other words, water does have its uses at the right time, as long as you're not exposed to the rain, soaking it up all the time, letting it penetrate your bones, shivering and catching your death of cold.

So as we're meditating, we're trying to develop that well-thatched roof: the ability to keep the mind focused on the breath and the right attitudes that allow us to see these affairs of the world for what they are. They're not really us, not really ours; they're just part of the world. They're like money. You may have money in your pocket, but it's not really yours. It's printed by the government. You look at the money and see: Does it have your name written on it? Well, no, it's got other people's names. Even with a credit card that *does* have your name on it: The bank's name is also on it, and the bank's name is bigger. It's in charge of what you can and can't do with the card. As for the value of the money, the government and the banks can change it whenever they want. If they wanted to call it back, they could do it. In the meantime, while you've got it, you use it. And you try to use it as wisely as possible, with the realization that it's not really yours to keep; it's a part of the world.

Once you can make that distinction, you find it a lot easier to live in the world and not soak up all the craziness of the world. You can stay warm and dry in your hut. It's well thatched. The rain may be falling all around, but it can't penetrate the roof. You can set out jars to gather up the run-off and put it in a tank, get some use out of it, which is much wiser than just going out walking in the rain, keeping yourself exposed all the time without any shelter at all.

So you're aiming at a combination of two things: having this place to stay with the breath and having the right attitudes toward all the things that would pull you away. That's how you learn how to thatch your roof and stay under it for your protection.