

High-Level Dhamma

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Ajaan Fuang used to say that the easiest people to teach are the ones who don't know too much about the Dhamma. Merchants from the town would come out to the monastery, no background in the Dhamma at all, and they were the easiest ones to teach. He'd say to do this, and they'd do this, and when they were ready for the next step, then he'd tell them about the next step. They didn't know about the next step beforehand, so they didn't have a lot of preconceived notions about what should happen in the meditation.

The ones who had read a lot often found that the reading got in the way. Sometimes they had been reading about very high level Dhamma, and they would sit and look at their minds where they were, and they weren't quite where the books said they should be. Either they'd get depressed or else they'd start trying to squeeze their minds into the direction they had learned from the books, which was basically just perceptions based on ignorance.

As Ajaan Lee once said, most people mistake low-level Dhamma for high-level Dhamma, and high-level Dhamma for low-level Dhamma. When we read about high-level Dhamma, all we get is just perceptions, labels, but when we look at our practice, we see we're dealing with very simple greed, anger and delusion: anger about this person, frustration about this—common everyday defilements. We don't like to have to deal with those. We want to go straight to the higher levels. But it's actually these immediate defilements in the present moment: That's high-level Dhamma. It's the reality you've got to deal with right here, right now. That's the important work. As for the concepts you develop from reading the books, put them aside.

Because we don't pick up only abstract concepts from scholarly books. Often we read the stories about the famous ajaans, and it sounds like they were on a straight path to nibbana. We have to realize a lot of that is part of the genre. When you write about your teachers in Thailand, you don't talk about the difficulties they had, you don't talk about their backsliding, you don't talk about their frustrations. It's considered poor form.

When I wrote Ajaan Fuang's biography to be handed out at the ceremony when his body was placed in the mausoleum, people were surprised that I put in some incidents he had told me about, times when his practice hadn't gone well, when he'd made mistakes. I thought the stories were inspiring, because seeing that

he had made mistakes, I could look at my own mistakes and not get too flustered by them, realizing that we all make mistakes in the path. Learning about his mistakes and how he finally worked his way around them, I found inspiring.

The Thais were surprised that I included that. Some people actually thought I shouldn't have.

So you have to realize when you're reading about the famous ajaans that the authors considered it a poor form to talk about maybe years when there was frustration. But it's there. It's there in everybody's practice. The important thing is to look at the frustration, look at the problems you're dealing with right here in the present moment, and realize that this is high-level Dhamma right here. What's there in the immediate present is the real thing. The stuff you've picked up from books is concepts. It's not yet real.

So when unskillful mind states are arising, we have to learn how to deal with them skillfully. Realize that it is possible. Sometimes it seems like frustration is taking over the whole mind. There doesn't seem to be the slightest room for any kind of skillful observer to get in there. But that's not the case. If you look really carefully, you see these mental states come and go, come and go, come and go. You can watch. Sometimes all you have to is just watch. Sometimes it's all you *can* do. If you can't figure anything out, well, you can always just watch. Always make sure the observer is there, because that's what deeps you in touch with what's actually going on.

Ajaan Lee once said that this is what the practice is all about: seeing your defilements. If you don't see your defilements, if you turn a blind eye to them, then no matter what else you do in the practice, you're not really practicing. To practice means seeing these issues as they come up, watching them, observing them. Sometimes it takes a long time, but this, after all, is a practice that goes someplace. And even though there may be difficulties, there may be backsliding, this is still a path with an open end, not like the closed-end paths of most people's lives.

Ajaan Maha Boowa tells a story when he was out in the forest one time and feeling very frustrated about his meditation. It so happened it was a holiday. The people in the village nearby were playing music and doing whatever else they did on a holiday, making a lot of noise. He could hear the noise way off in the distance. At first he thought, "Here I am, miserable in the forest, making myself miserable, while those people at least know how to have a good time." But then he came to his senses, "Hey, wait a minute, where are they going in their lives? They're not going anywhere in particular. Where does all that fun and games take

them? It doesn't take them anywhere. At least meditation leaves the door open. Whether it's going well or not going well, the door is there. It's open."

It's interesting that there's almost an identical story in the Pali Canon of a monk who overhears the music coming from a village one holiday night, and starts feeling miserable about himself. "At least they know how to have fun, while here I am just making myself miserable the forest." A deva comes and appears to him and says, "You don't know how many people envy you. Their lives are totally hemmed in, they're heading down to hell, but here you're on the good path."

So realize that you are on a path that goes someplace. And even though you may seem to be muddling around, you're dealing with the real issues right here, right now. That's what's important. They may not seem to be the most inspiring issues, they may not seem to be the issues that you want to deal with, but they're the ones that are here, they're the ones that offer themselves to you, so you can observe them. This is where the real Dhamma is learned—here in the present moment.

Where do you think the Buddha learned the Dhamma? He didn't have books to go by. He just had his ability to observe what was happening in the present moment, and if it took a long time to observe it, well, he just stuck with it.

Not that it's easy, but by watching these things, you have the opportunity to understand them, and when you can understand them, when you comprehend them, then you can go beyond them. If you don't watch them, if you distract yourself with all kinds of fancy concepts, the real job never gets done. It's our ability to see what the mind is actually doing to cause itself suffering: That's where the real Dhamma lies. That's the first noble truth right there, combined with the second noble truth. If you don't look at that, there's no way that the third and fourth noble truths can do their work.

So whatever gets served up in the present moment, think: This is the high-level Dhamma for right now. This is the actuality. This is the genuine thing right here. What we read about in books is just stories.

Ajaan Fuang told a story of Ajaan Mun, when he was visited by monks who'd gotten their degrees in Pali studies and were very proud of the fact that they had read all the way through the *Visuddhimagga*. The *Visuddhimagga* has basically three main sections: the *silaniddeśa*, *samādhiniddeśa*, and *paññāniddeśa*. *Niddeśa* means section or chapter. So Ajaan Mun said, "Well what do you have in the *Visuddhimagga*? There's the *silā-niddeśa*. What does *niddeśa* mean? It's *nidāna*," which in Thai means fables, stories. It's just words about those high level Dhammas. The real thing, he said, is in your mind right here right now. Either it's there or it's not.

The potential for virtue, the potential for concentration, the potential for discernment are all there. But it's not the case that you go straight to those things without having to muck around with your defilements, because the defilements are going to get in the way one way or another. Because our habit is to deal unskillfully with whatever comes up, then when the results of skillful actions come and are nice, we tend to get complacent—an unskillful reaction to something that was originally skillful. Or when things get bad, we just pile more unskillfulness on top of it, what they call positive feedback loops, “positive” in the sense of strengthening what's already there.

This is our problem. We tend to approach the results of skillful action with a negative feedback loop: We can get only so skillful, then we pull it back down. But it seems to be very easy to approach the unskillful things with positive feedback loops, which just keep pulling things even further and further down. It seems to be a habit with us, but it can be unlearned. The only way you can unlearn things is to watch. Watch, then watch again, watch again, and bit by bit by bit. Even though it may not be as fast or as convenient as you'd like to be, it's the only way out: dealing with what comes up in the present moment.

But it's not the case that it's always hard. There are pleasant stretches as well, good stretches. When you're stuck in a difficult stretch, that seems to be all there is, but that's not the case. Look around and see how many things you're *not* burdened with right now.

I remember the first time I ordained and disrobed, immediately after disrobing, there was a sense of weightlessness. I felt like I'd been freed from this huge burden of having to gain awakening. For a while it did feel like freedom, but then I began to realize: This is like being in an elevator where the cable has been cut, and there's a moment of weightlessness, but then you hit the ground. You suddenly realize you've got to go out and make a living, you've got to deal with people who don't treat you with the same respect that you got before. All these other things come crowding in, crowding in, and lay life suddenly feels very, very narrow, and very confined, as they say in the texts.

So learn to have an appreciation of what's *not* weighing you down. The Buddha calls that “alighting on emptiness”—in other words, realizing what disturbances are here, but what disturbances are *not* here. Don't add any on to what's naturally here. You have a sense of the space, the emptiness around the disturbances that are weighing your mind down, and you realize that there's a lot of space that you're not appreciating.

So take heart. The path is a good path. Even though it may seem frustrating, it's a path that goes someplace. Otherwise, we just wander around aimlessly, as the

Buddha said, like throwing a stick up in the air: Sometimes this end hits the ground, sometime the other end hits ground, sometimes it comes down splat in the middle. There's no real rhyme or reason to it. There's no pattern to it at all, the ups and downs of this wandering around. It goes nowhere.

But the noble path is one that does go someplace. That's the whole point. Whether it's easy or difficult is not the issue. The issue is that at least you're on a path that's going someplace really good. It's going to the end of suffering; it's going to true freedom.

As the Buddha said, if you could get a guarantee that if by submitting to being stabbed with spears a hundred times in the morning, a hundred times at noon, a hundred times in the evening for a hundred years, day in, day out, day in, day out, every day, but guaranteed that you would gain awakening at the end of that time, he said it would be a good deal. And when the awakening did come, he said, you wouldn't feel that you had won that awakening through pain or suffering. The awakening would have totally blotted out any sense of pain. It would have been much more than worth it.

So here we are, stabbing ourselves with mental spears with no guarantee of any reward, but we don't have to keep doing that. We don't have to add suffering on top of whatever unskillful states are already there. Just learn to watch, and watch again, watch again. Learn to be comfortable with the fact that you have the time, you have the space, and the opportunity to watch. All too many people don't even have that opportunity at all. They spend their time instead painting pictures about what high-level Dhamma they've attained, or are going to attain or whatever, but it's just all pictures. Here you are, grappling with the real thing.

That's what the Dhamma is. It's the real thing. So you've got everything you need right here. Whether it's the lesson you want to be learning right now, that's not the issue. It's the lesson that's presenting itself to be learned. Obviously, it's a lesson you need to learn, otherwise it wouldn't be there. You've got the time and the opportunity. Through the Dhamma, you've got the guidance in how to work your way through. Whether it's fast or slow, that's not the issue. The fact that you're working with the real issues of life: That's what matters.