

The Rewards of Cleanliness

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Ajaan Fuang used to talk about how neat and clean Ajaan Mun was about his surroundings. Even the rags that were used for wiping off your feet were always kept clean, neatly folded. The area around the monastery where he was staying in the forest was always well swept. And this is an important part of training that Ajaan Mun passed on.

There's a theme of Dhamma talks that you sometimes hear in Thailand, not so much in the forest tradition, but in ordinary everyday monasteries, of what they call the rewards of merit. Ajaan Fuang used to make a few snide comments about them, because the rewards seemed awfully large in comparison with the little deeds of merit. But one of the rewards touches on just this point: that by keeping the monastery clean, one of the rewards is wisdom and discernment. It's interesting to think about the connection, because this relates very directly to the mind. Keep the mind clean and you're going to gain a lot of discernment.

So what's the connection? One, when you're sweeping up a place, you get very intimately acquainted with it. If you wipe on a floor, you're very well acquainted with that floor. If you sweep a particular area every day, you're very well acquainted with where all the roots are, where all the branches are, where all the trees are, everything, because you have to look very carefully, to see where the dirt is.

And you can reflect on why you have to sweep up the leaves every day. Where do the leaves come from? There are leaves because there are trees. You think about your own mind. The reason you have suffering here is because there are defilements. There's something in the mind that keeps producing it. You've got to look for the source. Otherwise, you have to keep cleaning up the messes you make. That gets you thinking that you own mind.

And also, when you keep a place clean, you see the least little bit of uncleanliness. Ajaan Fuang's image was of a room. If you don't dust a room every day, there develops a dusty film all over everything. When the new dust comes in, you don't notice it. It just gets combined with old dust motes that were already there. But if you dust it every day, then when the least little bit of dust comes in, you notice. You see it.

It's the same with the mind. You try to keep the mind clean. If you notice any greed, anger, or delusion coming in, you try to keep it away, keep it away, trying to clean it up, clean it up. Then the next morning, something new comes in, and you

notice it right away. Because it's not just part of the normal flow of the mind, you see it in contrast to the mind when it was clean and bright.

In the same way, we keep the parking lot here well swept every day. One of the advantages is that if any animals come through, we see their tracks. A snake goes across the parking lot, we may not see the snake, but we do see its tracks. Bobcats come through, squirrels run around, rabbits run around, and we see their tracks clearly. We know who's been there, because we keep the place well swept.

It's the same with the mind. When greed, anger, and delusion come into the mind, if you just let them come in, come in, come in, you don't really notice them, after a while they seem to be the normal way of the mind—almost as if they are permanent inhabitants. But you try to keep the mind clean every time something comes up that's obviously causing suffering. You look into it, and see what you can do at the very least not to let it take over, so that it doesn't hang on, doesn't leave a residue. That way, the next time it comes in, you'll know. You'll see it. The cleaner you keep the mind, the more obvious the comings and goings of these will be.

You get very well acquainted with the ways of the mind. The more precise you are about any little thing that comes in that's going to disturb your concentration or disturb your peace of mind, then the more refined your concentration, the more clearly you see these things.

When you get the mind to settle down, it's like cleaning out your mind. And then you try to keep it clean. In the beginning, it may be a major job. It's like going into a room that nobody's cleaned for years and years and years. You need to haul everything out, decide what stays, what goes, what are the things that are really necessary. The things you don't need, you throw away. The things you want, you move back in. Then from that point on, it's a lot easier, just a little bit of dusting every day, making sure things don't accumulate. The room becomes a lot more livable.

The same with your mind: In the beginning, it's going to take a lot of work to get it all cleaned out. Or if you let it go for a long while before you start meditating again, it's going to take a while to clean it up again. But once it's been cleaned out and you've sorted things out and can get the mind to settle down, then from that point on, whenever the mind is not settling down, you notice it, even the least little bit. All you have to do is dust here, dust there. The important thing is that you're quick to see these things arise and to catch them in time.

So think about the meditation as being like cleaning up the mind—or weeding the mind. Again, there's an analogy there. If you just cut off the weed at the ground level, it's going to grow back again. At some point, you're going to have to

uproot it, but still, having it cut off at the ground level is better than not cutting it off at all, because if it doesn't get cut off, its flower is going to go to seed, and the seed is going to spread around, and you're going to have more weeds.

So when we're getting the mind into concentration, it's like cutting off the weeds at ground-level. From there, discernment is what goes down and digs out the roots to see where these things come from, these defilements of the mind. A lot of people don't like to hear the word "defilement." They say, "What's wrong with greed, anger and delusion? They have their good side." But once you've really got the mind clear for a while, you notice that these things really do cloud it. They obscure it. Only the people who've never really seen the mind clean and clear will object to the idea of calling these things defilement.

So try to get the mind to settle down and then think of that sense of ease spreading through the body, your awareness spreading through the body. As for any thoughts of greed, anger, delusion, fear, jealousy, whatever, as they come, you can recognize them as things you don't want to get involved with. You don't have to chase them away. If you don't get involved, they go. It's as if they come around offering things for sale. They may be insistent, they may really want to sell their wares to you, but if you don't show an interest, they'll go away. Your mind can settle down. The more you chase them around, the less chance you have of getting the mind to be still. But once it's still, even the slightest movement comes up, you see it.

You can also begin to see connections. That's where the discernment part comes in. Discernment is seeing the connection between the cause of suffering and the suffering itself. They do arise together; they pass away together. The cause of suffering is something that the mind does. Suffering is something that it feels. When you see the connection, you see that whatever the mind is doing is coming out of ignorance. You do your best to put all your powers of knowing into the area where the ignorance is, and you begin to see where these things come from.

So the clearer your powers of knowing, the more all-around, the more constant they are, then the closer you're going to get to where the real root of these things lie. Then you can pull it out. But whatever level of mind you're able to clean, do your best to keep it a clean every day. Don't get careless about this. After all, the dust builds up, and then become just a normal thing. More dust comes? Well, big deal, because there's so much dust there already. But the problem with dust is like the weeds. All kinds of things can live in the dirt, in the piles of junk in the corner. After a while, they take over. You can't live comfortably in the mind at all.

So you can't be careless. Keep the mind as clean as you can, day in and day out, day in and day out. That's job number one. As a result, you'll really get to know the mind. If you just accept everything as it comes and goes, you never really know anything, you never really understand anything. You're taking the position of just being passive, passive. If this comes, okay, that comes, okay. Dust fills up the room, okay. The wind blows things clean a little bit, okay. You never understand anything. You never get intimate with anything in the mind, intimate to the comings and goings, the causes and the effects. It's only when you get down on your hands and knees, and you polish the floor every day, that you get to know the floor very well. You see the least little bit of dust or dirt that comes in, and you catch it in time, so you don't always have to live with the dust and the dirt. Other people don't have to live with your dust and dirt, either. So this is not just for your own sake. It's for everybody around you.

One of the duties of a monk, when you move into a room or a hut someplace, is to clean it out as much as possible. I went into Bangkok one day, and I was cleaning up the room where I was going to stay. There was a Western monk who had been to Burma for many years, in and out. As long as he had a Burmese visa, he'd go to Burma. When the visa ran out, he'd come back to Thailand, and make another request for visa at the Burmese embassy, and just cool his heels, waiting for the Burmese to finally give him his new visa. He'd just come back from Burma and he decided to check out the various places in Bangkok where he knew Western monks might be, so he came by and saw me wiping down the floor. He'd just come from another place where another American monk who had come down from North was at another monastery wiping down the floor of his room. He said, "In Burma, we have laypeople who do this for us. You Thai monks, you're always spending all your times just wiping down the floors." I told him, "That's where the practice begins. Without that, it doesn't have a foundation."

Having a sense of cleanliness is an important part of the training, both inside and out.