

Straightening Out the World

January 31, 2006

The sound of the helicopters reminds me of the first time I went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, April, 1974. I'd wake up at 3 a.m. and the B52's were flying over. But they weren't just playing war games. They were actually going out on bombing runs into Cambodia.

My first feeling—hearing them every day, every day—was one of impotence. I felt like there was something I should be doing out there to stop this, and that by staying on that little mountain in Thailand I was neglecting my duty.

I mentioned this to Ajaan Fuang, and he said, “You know, you can only take on so many things in life. If you try to take on too many things, your goodness breaks.” Your good intentions get worn down. You get frustrated. The only way to maintain your goodness is to keep it focused where it'll make a difference.

As Ajaan Suwat once said, each of us has only one person—in other words, we're responsible for ourselves, our own intentions. We can't be responsible for other people's intentions. So this is where our work has to begin: right here, right here in training the mind.

In the Dhammapada, the Buddha noted that one of the main differences between wise people and foolish people is that wise people see the need to train the mind; foolish people don't. Wise people see that everything comes out of the mind. It's what makes all the difference in the world. Your actions, your thoughts, the words you say: They all come out of your mind and they can be really harmful if you're not careful.

This is why you have to exercise mindfulness and make it stronger. And this is what we're doing right here: We're exercising the mind. All the good qualities in the mind—mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment: Without these qualities you get careless; you don't really see what's going on, even on the surface level. Something pops into your head and you say it, and then you realize afterwards what you said, but then it's too late—to say nothing of the things going on deeper in the mind. When anger forms, how does it form? What are its subterfuges? What are the stages it goes through before you're aware of it?

The same with greed and lust. These things have their stages. If you can't see them as they're forming, you're usually aware of them only after they've come out in your thoughts and your words and deeds, and that's when they've already had a bad effect, both for yourself and for the people around you. So if you want to make the world a better place, this is where you have to start.

There's a teaching called the cycle of action. First you act, then there's the result of the action, and then you react to that result. Then, based on the reaction, you act again. If there's a defilement in the mind with the reaction, that means that the subsequent action will be defiled as well, unskillful as well. You get results that you like and you want to hold onto them. That

makes you greedy. You get results you don't like and you want to push them away. That's the beginning of aversion. When you don't see what's happening, that's delusion.

Now, you can't cut the cycle between the action and the result. You can't do something with unskillful motives and hope that it's going to give a happy result. Action and result are firmly connected. But you *can* begin to cut things between the result and the defilement, or between the defilement and the action. In other words, if you can replace the defilement with a more skillful state of mind, then you can prevent yourself from acting in a defiled way.

This is why mindfulness and alertness are so important. You see what's happening and you realize, "This is not going to be skillful," so you stop. Or even better, if you can begin to get to the root of the defilement before it arises: Something pleasant comes up, and you don't have to give rise to greed; something unpleasant comes up, you don't have to give rise to anger; when there's equanimity in the mind, you don't have to be deluded. These defilements are not necessary.

As Ajaan Lee once said, there are two types of suffering in the world: the suffering that's natural, that simply comes with part of having a body; and then the suffering that's *not* natural, that comes from our defilements.

What is a defilement? It's something that clouds the mind. It's like a cloud that comes in front of the Sun, darkens the Sun. The Sun itself is still bright but there's that cloud there, so we can't see things as clearly. If you were to ask ordinary people, "Is your mind defiled?" they'd say, "Oh, no, my mind's perfectly fine." And yet they're *filled* with defilements. The mind isn't nearly as luminous as it could be.

This is why we practice mindfulness, practice alertness, so that we can catch these things before they gain strength. We begin our work with plain old distraction: You're here focusing on the breath and something else comes up in the mind. You've got that moment where you can choose: Are you going to go with it or are you going to stay with the breath? In the beginning stages, it's as if you don't know what's happening. You're with the breath and suddenly you're someplace else: thinking about friends, thinking about family; thinking about tomorrow, thinking about yesterday; the food we had this morning, the food we're going to have tomorrow—all kinds of things you can get all tied up in. And you wonder how it happened.

Distraction is so powerful that it has you thoroughly taken in. Part of the process is that the mind lies to itself. It makes a choice and then it pretends that it didn't make the choice. It buries things so deeply down in your subconscious zones that you don't really know what happened. Part of you *does* know, and that's the issue. But that's also what makes it possible to overcome distraction.

The trick is getting to be quicker and quicker at seeing the process, catching yourself earlier and earlier in the stages of distraction. It's not going to be the case that you once did have distraction and then suddenly you're all done with distraction. It's a skill that you develop

gradually over time. You get quicker and quicker and quicker at catching yourself, until finally you see that point where you made the choice. Then you can work back and see the point where the mind is beginning to get a little bit bored with its meditation or frustrated with its meditation and it wants something else, so it starts looking for distraction. You want to be able to catch that point as well.

The purpose of all this is not only that you get stronger in your concentration, but you also begin to see what's actually going on in the mind: the kind of dialogues, the kind of conversations that go on in the mind. Because the conversations that surround distraction are the same ones that are going to surround lust, aversion, delusion, greed, fear, all these other emotions, both while you're here meditating and while you're engaged with the world outside.

In Thai they use the word *than*, which means to be up on something, to be fast enough to catch up with something as it's happening. That's what we're trying to do as we meditate: to catch up with these things, to be quick enough to sense them. Because it's from these little things that all the big problems in the world grow. All the greed and anger and stupidity that we see in the world comes out of these little moments in the mind.

There's no way you're going to straighten out other people's minds unless you can straighten out your own mind first. And even then, they won't let you straighten them out: You can give them pointers, and they may or may not be willing to listen to you, but at the very least you've taken care of the part where you are responsible and you can see results.

When you come right down to it, that's all you can ask of a human being. You've got this one person who you're responsible for. All too often we're irresponsible about ourselves but we want to straighten everybody else out. It doesn't work.

Only when you've straightened out your own mind will other people be curious about how you did it. Only to that extent can you actually have an influence out there on other people's behavior. But at the very least, make sure you're got your own behavior.

As Ajaan Suwat once said, it doesn't matter whether we get other people here at the monastery, what matters is that you get yourself. If you get yourself and other people are attracted to come and practice the same way, fine. If not, well, at least you've got yourself. And that's much more than most people can say.