

## *In Line with the Dhamma*

*June 7, 2005*

There was once a senior scholarly monk from Bangkok who went to see Ajaan Mun in the forest and said, "Here you are, living out in the forest. What do you do when you have problems in understanding the Dhamma? Who can you go and ask? I live in Bangkok where there are lots of very well-known wise man, and even then there are times when I've run into questions they can't answer. What do you do when you're all alone in the forest?"

The story behind these questions is that this particular monk was not all that impressed with Ajaan Mun. So the questions were something of a taunt. But Ajaan Mun's response was, "I hear the Dhamma all day long, 24 hours a day, except when I'm asleep. As soon as anything comes in contact with the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, there's Dhamma being proclaimed.

In other words, the Dhamma is always there if only we would listen to it, if only we would practice it. The problem is we don't listen. We'd much rather listen to our own delusions. This is a comment that Ajaan Fuang made one time, that people don't like to hear the truth. They'd much rather be lied to. Part of them knows they're being lied to, but they like it because it means they can get away with lying to themselves. They don't like running up against the truth. And of course, as a result, they suffer. We suffer because we fool ourselves. We delude ourselves. We do things that we would like to have lead us to happiness, but they don't lead to happiness.

There's that old story about the man eating a whole bushel of peppers and crying. People say to him, "Why are you crying? Why are you eating those peppers?" He responds, "I'm looking for the sweet." Even when we know that peppers are hot, we keep looking for the sweet one. We do the same things over and over again, hoping they'll lead to happiness maybe next time. They didn't do it the last time, but maybe next time. That's a basic human attitude.

The mind is used to lying to itself. This is why it's so easy for advertisers to lie to us. They've learned all the tricks that the mind plays on itself and they use them to make us happy to be lied to. If we really looked at our lives, we'd find it really discouraging. We've spent so much effort, so much time, with so little to show for it. So we like hanging around people who have the same delusions we do. That way, our delusions don't get questioned. People like that don't make us look at how little we have to show for our efforts, which is why one of the healthiest things you can do is go to a place where people have different assumptions,

especially if you can find some people who have learned to look at the truth about what really does cause suffering, and what really is the way out of suffering. It may be difficult. It may be hard, this way that they practice, but it's bracing. It's good for us to learn the truth because it's the only way out. It's the only way to get over our delusions and actually stop causing suffering for ourselves.

This is why, in every description in the texts of how people gain awakening and freedom from suffering, they have to go through the stages of disenchantment and dispassion. The Buddha talked about the principle of practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. It's an important principle. In one place he says that it's the way you really show respect for the Buddha: not with flowers, incense, and candles, but by actually putting what he caught into practice. He also states, though, what it means to practice the Dhamma in line with Dhamma. It means practicing for the sake of dispassion, learning to see through all the things that we've been doing and realizing that we've been causing ourselves unnecessary suffering. This means dismantling a lot of our illusions, in particular, about ourselves and who we are. Just look at your assumption about who you are. What's it made of?

It's made out of forms, feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, and acts of consciousness. That's it. We've cobbled our sense of self out of these things. When you actually look at them, you can see that there's really not that much there. These things keep changing and changing and changing, so how could we find any sense of real stability out of our constructs when the raw materials themselves are changing? It's like building a house out of something you thought was solid but when you look at it carefully, you realize it's frozen meat. As soon as the sun comes out, as soon as it warms up, the meat's going to start thawing. And when it thaws, the whole thing is going to fall down and create a huge mess.

Then you can turn and look at things outside that you're hoping to depend on for your happiness, and you see that they're inconstant, stressful, and undependable as well. We don't like to see that. As long as we practice the Dhamma not wanting to see that, we're not practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. We have to practice for the sake of dispassion because it's good for us, in the sense that it really does lead to true happiness if you can learn to just give up your delusions, give up your illusions about what's going to make you happy. It's demanding. Because as I said, it's not only giving up illusions about things outside, but also your illusions about who you are, what really belongs to you, what really is worthwhile in life.

But the rewards are great. As the Buddha said, dispassion is the highest Dhamma.

There's a passage where he divides dhammas into two types, fabricated and unfabricated. The highest fabricated dhamma, he says, is the noble eightfold path. It's highest because it leads to the highest unfabricated dhamma, which is dispassion. This is important. We have to have some passion for the path. We can't just decide that we're going to give up any interest in anything at all, and think that'll get us where we want to go. That's just dying. You first have to be interested in the path, to practice the path, to put it into practice day in and day out, to see which of the factors you're not really clear on, which ones you're not really putting into practice, and to adjust your practice so that it falls in line with the Buddha's path. Make sure your efforts are right effort. If you see anything unskillful in your mind, put an end to it. And develop a desire to put an end to it. Talk yourself into seeing why it's a good thing to put an end to it, why you don't want to side with your moments of greed, anger, and delusion, so that you actually have some enthusiasm for the path.

The same with working on developing mindfulness, concentration, and discernment: Develop enthusiasm for these things because they're good things. They're useful in all kinds of activities, and especially the activities that lead to awakening. The Buddha talks about this kind of desire as being an important element in right effort. It's the kind of desire you have to generate. You have to develop it first before dispassion can actually be healthy dispassion.

So as you sit down and practice, and you feel tired or discouraged or bored about the whole thing, do what you can to make it interesting. Do what you can to make it intriguing, this process of learning to understand the mind, learning to understand the breath energy in the body, how you can use that breath energy as an aid in you practice. Develop an interest in it. Let it capture your imagination.

The road to dispassion has to lead through desire and imagination skillfully applied. This doesn't mean imagination in the sense of sitting and thinking up little worlds for the mind to entertains itself with. It's imagination focused on thinking of what you can do with your raw materials. You've got the breath. You've got the body. In the past, you've made a lot of unskillful things out of it. How can you now make something skillful out for it, something that actually leads away from suffering? Let that challenge capture your imagination until the path is fully developed.

That's when it leads you to healthy dispassion. You've made up something really good with the mind. You've looked at all the other unskillful things you've been doing with your thoughts and words and deeds, and you realize that you don't want to go there anymore. You've got something better. You use the path to develop dispassion for all other things aside from the path. Then you turn and

look at the path itself. It, too, is something put together, something jerry-rigged, but at least it's delivered you where you want to be. You can now develop dispassion for that. What's left is the deathless.

The problem is that you can develop a passion for the deathless, so you have to learn how to develop dispassion for that as well. As the ajaans say, everything gets given back. All the things you laid claim to as your own, even the idea of laying claim to your experience of something unconditioned: Give that up as well. Let go of that as well, because you see that that, too, can be a burden on the mind. It's the last thing that stands between you and total awakening, total freedom. Lots of passages in the Canon, after talking about dispassion as the highest Dhamma, talk about going beyond both passion and dispassion. In other words, anything that can be described, you let it go.

That's where the path of practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma leads: to total freedom through the doorways of the path, the element of desire and imagination you need on the path, dispassion, and then relinquishing even dispassion, seeing through all your illusions—and even letting go of things that are not illusions. There's nothing you have to carry around from that point on.

That's when the mind is totally free illusions, when it doesn't cause any suffering for itself or for anybody at all. But it requires that you look very carefully at the things you hold most dear—and that when you run into the truth, you learn to accept it as the truth. Learn how to listen to the Dhamma 24 hours a day. It's there proclaiming itself all the time: "These things are inconstant stressful, and not-self. Craving is always causing suffering. Ignorance is always causing suffering." It's happening all the time, but the reason we don't see it is because we're more content with our illusions—but that means also that we're content with the suffering they cause. We have to learn how to put these two facts together, and realize it's time to wake up. It is only then that you can have any real freedom.

So when you run into anything in the path that's difficult to do, just remind yourself that this difficulty is not insurmountable. That point is an important part of wisdom, an important part of our discernment: The problems of suffering can be cured. Believing that is something really basic.

As the Buddha once said, there are four kinds of activities in life. There are things that we like to do that give good results, and things we don't like to do that give bad results. Those are no-brainers. The difficult ones are the things we like to do that give bad results, and the things we don't like to do that give good results. The measure of our wisdom and discernment is our ability to talk ourselves into doing the things that will give good results even though we don't like doing them,

and to talk ourselves out of doing the things we like to do but we know will give bad results. It sounds very basic. It's a lesson every little child has to learn, but we never seem to learn it.

We like to think the reason we haven't gained awakening is because discernment involves some very abstract, difficult, and subtle matters. And there is a subtlety to it, but it's a subtlety that is also so basic. We don't connect our actions with their results. That's the problem. For some reason, we like to hide that connection. That's our big delusion. It's nothing far away, nothing abstract. It's just the way the mind lies to itself all the time. But if you really don't want to suffer, that desire should be your impetus to look carefully at your actions and their results. Don't leave any room for delusion.

The problem with living in delusion is that you're always going to be threatened by reality. But if you learn how to admit reality, to act in line with the way things actually are, then there's nothing threatening. You're not building anything that's going to be washed away by the waves. The path you build will be a solid path, and it'll take you to something that's even more subtle and stable, and that doesn't have to be built at all.

Once the mind is totally with the truth and is totally telling the truth to itself, nothing anywhere of any kind can threaten it in any way.