Polished on All Sides

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An important part of our practice is to develop right view, the kind of view that can lead to the end of suffering. It’s important to remember that right view operates on two levels. The first level comes from the mind. The second level concerns people, the way of the universe. In other words, it’s conviction that death is not the end, conviction that our actions really do matter, and the conviction that there are people who really know these things. It’s not just an idle theory, but there are people who’ve seen for themselves that good actions like virtue, gratitude, generosity, really do have value. That they’re not just idle ideas or sweet but ineffective thoughts or impractical thoughts. There’s so much in the world that says, “It’s dog-eat-dog out there. You’ve got to fight and do anything you can to get ahead.” As the Buddha points out, that’s not the way to happiness at all. It comes from having a sense of gratitude for the goodness of other people, which is a sign that we appreciate how important goodness is and how important it is to make the effort to be good ourselves. We value generosity. The Buddha once said, “Stingy people can’t attain even the first jhana, to say nothing of the noble attainments.” The whole practice has to be based on a sense of generosity, the willingness to give. And a realization that sometimes the results of our good actions may not show themselves immediately, or even in this lifetime. The realization that we’re in this for the long haul. That’s the right view in the context of the narratives of our lives. When you think about what you’re doing with your life, what’s worthwhile in your life, these are the thoughts to think. These are thoughts to keep in mind. But there comes a point where even this level of right view has to be transcended. When you realize that no matter how much you give, no matter how much gratitude you have, there’s still suffering in the mind. Even if you do take care of the issue of where you’re going after life, that you do your best to build a good rebirth, that’s not the end. It’s very easy for people, once they get a good rebirth, to misuse it. No matter where you’re born, there are still levels of stress, dis-ease. There’s an inherent instability in the world, in all worlds. When you realize this, that’s when you want to look for a way out. That’s where the second level of right view comes in. Simply seeing things in terms of stress, its origination, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. When you look at these issues, you’re looking right in the present moment at the issues of who you are, the past narrative of your life. Those get put aside and you simply look at what’s immediately apparent. In other words, you take even the goodness you’ve been doing and you start taking it apart. This applies to all levels of the path. Starting right now, staying with the breath, trying to get the mind to settle down, to be still, not allowing it to be disturbed by anything good or bad. Ultimately, there comes a point where you have to even take the concentration apart to see what levels of subtle stress there are in the concentrated mind, where the origin for stress is, even when the mind is very still and very clear. In other words, there comes a point where you have to question even your goodness. One of the first things that attracted me to Ajaan when I first met him was his sense of humor. It was good-natured but skeptical. Again, skeptical not in the sense of being bitter or not believing in goodness in the world, but you have to be very careful about it. You can’t fully trust the goodness of the world. John Lee once said, “The nature of the world is that things are good. The goodness of things is not genuine, and the genuine nature of things is that they’re not really good.” That’s stating a little bit strongly, but the principle is just that. You can’t trust all the good things that come your way. You have to appreciate goodness. You have to value goodness, but you have to be a little bit skeptical about it. You can’t be heedless. I noticed that Ajaan Foon was not the sort of person who would trust people very readily. He didn’t treat them with a lot of suspicion, but he was reserved. He wanted to get to know you first before he was going to really trust you. I’d lived with him two years before he even allowed me into his room. I eventually became his attendant, but he wanted to make sure that he could trust me. Not that he was afraid I’d steal anything, but just that I’d had too many strong opinions about where his pillows should be or how things should be arranged. He’d noticed that tendency in me. I had strong ideas about what was a good way to straighten things out. So he waited until he felt he could trust me before he took me on as his attendant. We may not like the idea of someone who is leery of other people like this, but you have to remember, he had also learned how to be leery of himself. To look at his what seemed to be good motives and learn how to detect if there was anything lurking in there that wasn’t quite skillful. In other words, if you can’t be skeptical about other people, how are you going to be skeptical about yourself? We always tend to trust ourselves more than we trust other people. And you can never really dig out what are the unskillful motives that may be lurking behind something that seems perfectly fine, perfectly skillful and generous. If you can’t dig those out, you’ll never get anywhere in the practice. This is why one of the most important attitudes you can develop as a meditator is just that, this ability to be skeptical in a good-natured way. You don’t take everything at face value. You watch. This is why we practice concentration, to develop a steady and level gaze. Whatever comes up in the mind, you watch it for a while. Even when really good things come up in the mind, you watch them for a while. When an insight comes, watch to see what happens next. Don’t get excited about your insights. Because whatever comes up in the meditation, you want to test it to see what you can really trust. What really is skillful? The best way to find that, to answer that question, is to watch things. Watch things over time. Watch them again and again. As I said, it’s the same way as when you try to know a person’s purity, know their virtue, know their wisdom, know their powers of endurance. You have to be willing to spend time with those people. And be very observant. The same principle applies to your own wisdom, purity, endurance, and virtue. Watch yourself very carefully. Again, do this in a good-natured way. You don’t want to make this a heavy, hypercritical type of attitude, but you want to be realistic and you want to be very clear-sighted. You can bring this attitude to your meditation and you find that you yourself become more and more trustworthy. I think that’s why I was drawn to Ajahn Fung’s good-natured skepticism, because I began to sense more and more that he was a person I could really trust. That’s because he attested himself again and again and again. So we work on developing goodness in our lives. We work on developing good skills in our meditation. But at the same time, you have to learn how to question your goodness. For what purpose? To make it better. To make it more reliable. It’s like polishing a diamond. If you polish only a few sides of it, it doesn’t have its full radiance. If all the sides are polished, then you’ve got a really radiant diamond. You want your goodness to be polished on all sides.

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