Think Like a Thief

May 16, 2006

When I went back to Thailand to ordain, one of the first things that Chan Fung said to me was that if I wanted to learn the Dhamma, I was going to have to learn how to think like a thief. In other words, I couldn’t expect to have everything explained, everything handed to me on a platter. If I wanted to learn the Dhamma, I had to be observant. After all, how does a thief think? Suppose a thief is going to plan to rob a house. He can’t go up and knock on the door and ask the owners of the house when they’re going to be away so that he can conveniently come in and steal what they have. He has to case the joint, hide out, watch, see when they come, see when they go, what doors they leave open, what windows they leave open. Where do they keep their valuables? Only then can he have any hope of stealing their valuables and getting away. There’s a purpose in this. It wasn’t just playing a game. One of the basic skills you need as a meditator is to be observant. You’re not going to gain discernment simply by following directions. There are meditation techniques that give you directions that say, “Do this, do that,” and somehow automatically you’re going to gain insight just by following the directions. It’s like expecting to get genuine food out of a food processing plant. What you actually end up with is meditation product, like the food products that have so little food that they have to, by law, label themselves as food product. You get the semblance of discernment, the semblance of insight, but not the real thing. The real thing has to come from within your ability to notice things. This fits in with Aristotle’s definition of intelligence, the ability to see connections that nobody else had pointed out to you. That, after all, was the Buddha’s insight on the night of his awakening. He saw connections that nobody else had ever pointed out to him. Connections between craving, ignorance, and stress and suffering. All those connections of dependent co-arising. Those are things he observed. He thought like a thief. He didn’t expect the truth to be handed to him on a platter. The thing is, the truth is there to be seen at all times, if only you have the mind to observe it. So as I stayed with Ajahn Fung, it wasn’t just a matter of listening to Dharma talks. In fact, he gave very few Dharma talks. You’ll probably count all the Dharma talks I heard from him during those ten years on the fingers of two hands. If you asked him a question, he would give you an answer. Sometimes the answers are detailed. When he felt that you needed a long explanation, other times they’re very short. Sometimes he wouldn’t answer at all. I’ll leave you to go back and think out the answer. This is the way Ajahn Lee had trained him. You look at the Ajahns who talk about their time with Ajahn Mun, and it was how Ajahn Mun taught his students as well. He wanted them to be observant, to learn how to think and observe on their own. So keep this point in mind. You have to learn how to use your eyes and ears in new ways. As the chant pointed out just now, most of us use our eyes and ears as flamethrowers. What we see and what we hear is only what fits inside our own ideas, what fits in with our greed, anger, and delusion. In other words, there’s actually more coming out our ears and eyes than there is coming in, more in terms of suppositions, preconceptions, likings and dislikings. Even when we try to be perfectly non-reactive, the fires of delusion come out our eyes. For those we tend to miss, as the Buddha said, in equanimity, in non-reactivity, there is what he calls the asava, or effluent of ignorance. So even when we think that we’re being very calm, we still don’t see anything because there’s more energy going out our eyes than there is coming in. So as with so many things in the Buddhist path, what we have to do is take our eyes, which we’ve been using in the wrong way, taking our ears, every one of our senses, and applying them to a new use. Learning how to be observant starts with learning how to observe our own actions, the results of our actions, and observing the teacher. Maybe not everything the teacher does is an embodiment of the Dhamma, but there’s a lot there that is. So it’s for you to figure out which is the Dhamma and which is not, which is a good lesson and which is not. If you don’t take an interest in this, there’s all the Dhamma that’s being displayed around all the time, not only in the teacher’s behavior, but in the behavior of everything around you, in terms of cause and effect. It’s being proclaimed at all times, and yet you don’t notice. You’re too busy throwing flames with your senses, throwing flames with your mind. Sometimes only you are the one burned, but sometimes it goes out and burns people around you. So think about this. How do you use your eyes? It all starts with your intentions. Are you using them simply for enjoyment? Are you using them to learn? To observe? The same principle applies with all your senses. The mind spends so much time creating worlds for itself. This is what’s called the process of becoming. Can you turn it around and devote it to the project of learning how to understand that process of becoming so you can put an end to it? It all comes from your intention. Do you really want to see, or do you just want to play with your likes and dislikes? This is an important issue. As we come to practice the Dhamma, our true happiness is at stake. This is what the Buddha’s teachings are. It’s a serious pursuit of true happiness. What gets in the way is our old ways of pursuing happiness, the ones that we’re used to, the ones that don’t give very satisfactory results, which is why we’re here, trying to find something better. But even then, we keep falling back into our old ways, seeing what we want to see, not seeing what we don’t want to see. As a result, the Dhamma that’s being proclaimed all the time, and the behavior of everything around you, doesn’t have a chance to get in. There’s too much energy flowing out the senses. There’s not much coming in. So this is what makes all the difference. Your willingness to be observant, your willingness to learn new things. After all, as the Buddha said, this is a project and we’re trying to attain what we’ve never attained before, to see what we’ve never seen before, to realize what we’ve never realized before. If you simply keep looking at things the old way, acting the old way, thinking the old way, nothing new has a chance to come in. So try to get some control over this flame producer, this fire producer. It’s the Buddha’s image for clinging. When we say the word “clinging,” it calls to mind the idea that we’ve got a hand that’s holding on to an object. Clinging is actually defined as desire or passion for activities. We feel desire or passion for form, feeling, perceptions, thought formations, consciousness, all of which are activities. We feed off of these things the way a fire feeds off of fuel. Then we get stuck on these things the way a fire is stuck in its fuel. The basic image the Buddha uses here, of course, you know the word nirvana, the fire goes out. When it goes out, it’s freed because it lets go. It stops doing those things. It’s an end of a process that causes suffering. So if you want to see the Dhamma, you have to look at this habit the mind has of clinging to things, wanting things to be a certain way, and as a result, not seeing what’s there to be seen at all times. The Dhamma is said to be akaliko. It’s present all the time. But we’re not looking. We’re too busy churning out fire. Even our equanimity is a fire because it’s bound up with ignorance. The only way to get around that is to make up your mind. You want to be very, very observant. Think like a thief. Not because the Dhamma is not being freely offered. It is being freely offered. It’s there all the time. But it’s only by thinking like a thief can you get around your old habits of not wanting to see. That’s why, if you actually can get around those old habits, then your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind, instead of being channels for the mind, become channels for defilement, turn around and become channels of knowledge. That’s how we see and realize and attain what we’ve never seen, realized, or attained before.

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