After the Fire

October 26, 2007

The events of the past few days—the fires, the smoke, the winds—serve as a blatant reminder, in case you’ve forgotten, of what an alien place we live in. And I’m not just talking about Southern California, this physical world, this human world we live in. It’s a very treacherous place. It seems designed to destroy human happiness, human hopes. We work to build up a little something we can depend upon. But it seems that everything that the world creates, the world also destroys. This constant cycle of creation and destruction leaves very little standing for any length of time. We want happiness, a happiness that stands, a happiness that doesn’t change. Some people say, “Well, the world was created by a benevolent creator.” Looking at the events of the past few days, it’s hard to see any evidence for that. The world just goes its own way, regardless of what we want. No matter how much we plead with it, it can’t change its basic nature. This means that if we’re looking for happiness, we’re going to have to change our basic habits. Instead of looking outside, we have to look inside. As the Buddha said, this is a path that involves two sorts of things. There’s development and abandoning. The abandoning is obvious. Like the day we left here, we could have come back to nothing. I must admit, as I bowed down that last time on Tuesday morning before we left, I looked around and wondered if we’ll ever see any of this ever again. This place has been built out of generosity. Look at each item in the salai. Look all around. It’s the work of people who’ve given their time, given their energy, given their money. Every object, when you look at it, has that kind of goodness radiating from it. It comes from generosity. Yet even that kind of goodness in the objects, we like to think, has some sort of protective power. That’s why we’re here. But it could have happened any other way. The wind could have come our direction and that would have been it. So there are things you’ve got to let go. But in order to let go, you need something more solid to hang on to. That’s where the development comes in. When the Buddha talks about the factors for awakening, they’re all things that we develop. They’re things that we try to bring into being. Some of them emphasize the developing more and others emphasize the letting go more. But the ability to let go is something you have to develop as well. So these are things we work on. Of the seven, the Buddha says one is always appropriate. That’s mindfulness, keeping these issues of skillfulness in mind. What’s the most skillful approach? What is needed right now? Keeping that question in mind. And from there, the factors for awakening fork out into two sides. There’s the more active side, analysis of qualities of mind, when you look to see what is most skillful and what is unskillful in your mind. There’s persistence, which essentially is right effort, working at abandoning the unskillful qualities and developing the more skillful ones, which can lead to an energized sense of rapture, fullness in body and mind. Those are the qualities that involve working, developing. These are the states you have to hold on to when everything else needs to be let go of. We learn how to keep the mind at peace and calm in the midst of the storms, the firestorms and mindstorms that can come swirling around you. There’s serenity, concentration, and equanimity. These are the states you have to hold on to when there’s nothing else to hold on to. Learn to be still, quiet. Stillness, that quietness, is an important refuge. But it’s important that you get it balanced, because stillness without mindfulness can just become dull, sleepy, diluted, drifting off. There has to be an element of interest in the stillness to keep it awake, to keep it alive. This is why, as things begin to settle down in the mind, you can ’t just allow the mind to drift off any way at once or to latch on to a feeling of pleasure and just take the pleasure as your object, because it begins to get fuzzy after a while and the mind begins to get dull. Once the mind is still, you need to work for it to do it, to keep it interested. That’s why John Lee has you investigate the different ways in which breath energy can benefit the body and benefit the mind, what levels of breath energy there are in the body. There are other ways as well. Keeping the mind interested, you can go through the thirty-two parts of the body. You can analyze the body into its elements, its properties of earth, water, fire, and wind, space and consciousness. This way you achieve a sense of balance. The stillness has to be balanced. There has to be mindfulness there. You’re trying to get all the factors to awakening working together so they’re all balanced. The analysis of qualities. What kind of breathing is skillful? What kind of breathing is unskillful? Then you work at developing the skillful kind of breathing. This way you get concentration and the more active elements working together. It’s only when you find the mind is really lopsided in one direction that you really focus your energy on either the more active side or the more passive side. Once things have been brought more into balance, then you want to have all seven of the factors of awakening present. Sometimes you see them presented in such a way that everything is working towards equanimity. But, as the Buddha said, equanimity has its time and its place. There are times when just simply being equanimous about things gets you sunk in all kinds of problems. You miss the point that there are things that you can change and things that you can’t. If it’s something you can’t change, you pause to equanimity. If it’s something you can change and needs to be changed, go ahead and do it. Work on the qualities of mind that you need. Don’t simply come here hoping that you get the mind still, still, still, still, still, freeze into a stillness. We’re working on a whole range of skills. Stillness is one of them, but it requires the more active factors for awakening as well. The rapture comes from taking a sense of joy in doing things well. I was reading the other night that someone was painting a picture of the path in which it was very stern and moralistic that you had to really whip yourself into shape and come down hard on any weakness. It all sounds very uninviting. Only great heroes can do that kind of practice. I must admit that there are many times in our practice when we don’t feel very heroic. But the Buddha himself often presents the practice not in such stern, moralistic terms. After all, he’s not in a position to force anything on us, saying, “We have to do this or we have to do that.” What he’s saying is, “Look, you can do this skillfully.” All of his analogies are from different skills that people work on and develop. The whole point of a skill is that you learn how to do it well and like to do it well and enjoy doing it well. You find it an interesting challenge, a challenge that you’re ready to rise for. That’s the skillful approach to the practice. We live in this alien world, but it is possible to find a happiness that, in the beginning of the path, has to make use of the things of the world. Eventually it leads beyond the world, but we’re able to take advantage of what the world has to offer. We’ve got this body, we’ve got this life. We can use these things to find happiness, a well-being that goes way beyond the influence of the world. The Buddha presents that as a challenge. Not as a stern moral obligation, but simply a realistic look at what our situation is and what the potentials there are in our situation. If you learn how to take joy in the skill of the practice, that joy gives the practice a lot of energy. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, “The rapture is what acts as the lubricant for the practice.” Without it, it gets dry, like an engine whose lubricant has dried up. Things begin to freeze up after a while. So learn how to do this with a sense of serenity and a sense of rapture, even in the midst of this alien landscape, where not only the chaparral is burning, but your eyes are burning, your ears, your nose, your tongue, your body, your mind are burning. But where it’s hot, that’s where the cold or the coolness can be found. If you look with skill and ingenuity, you can find it.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2007/071026%20After%20the%20Fire.mp3>