Listen to the Dhamma 24 Hours a Day

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There was once a senior monk from Bangkok who wasn’t all that inspired with the forest tradition. But his teacher was. And so he found himself being dragged along every time his teacher went to visit Ajahn Mun. And so one time he asked Ajahn Mun a question. “I live in Bangkok. I have all these wise and educated monks around the city. And even then there are times when I run into problems in my practice that nobody there can answer. And what do you do out here alone in the forest? Where do you get to listen to the Dharma?” And Ajahn Mun replied, “I listen to the Dharma 24 hours a day. Except when I’m asleep. It’s there being taught all the time.” And the monk from Bangkok said, “Well, it’s good that you’re able to listen that way.” So as we’re sitting outside, as we go into nature, it’s important that you learn how to listen. Because the senior monk from Bangkok was right in that. You can be out in nature and you can get all kinds of different lessons, depending on what your perspective is. John Muir writes about being in Yosemite, coming across the carcass of a dead bear, and seeing all the little animals eating on the carcass of the dead bear, he came away with this very joyous view of the interconnectedness of all things. Nothing ever really dies, it all becomes part of life again. You wonder what the bear would have thought of that. Because basically he was coming from the perspective, John Muir, that there’s nothing better than this. So if this is as good as it gets, you learn how to celebrate it. Beings having to die so that other beings can feed. So you turn it into a lesson in interconnectedness and try to make it wonderful. The Buddha, however, would have looked at it in a very different way. He’d have us look at it in a very different way, because he found that there was something much better than nature that can be found inside the mind. And it’s because we’re attached to keep coming back, coming back, coming back. We don’t see that something better in the mind. So from the Buddha’s point of view, it’s good to look at the drawbacks all around you. The fact that beings have to feed off of other beings in order to survive. That’s disconcerting enough. And you see all the suffering that goes on in the meantime. Those birds calling, even the crickets. It’s not necessarily that they’re just happily singing away. Things are changing all the time. I was reading about a scientist who was studying the pollen in lakes. He was able to dig down into the layers and layers of mud down in the bottom of lakes and get a sense of what trees have existed in different periods of history, or prehistory, here on the continent. When you flash all the different patterns on a computer screen, it looks like trees are marching up and down. And the nature writer asked him one time, “What do you see when you look at these patterns?” He says, “I see death.” The trees aren’t moving. The pollen is moving, but the trees are dying. And so inconstancy, impermanence, stress and suffering, the not-selfness of it all. These are the things we should hear when we’re out listening to nature. These are the things we should see when we’re looking at nature. But we’re blinded, as in those four dharma summaries. The world is swept away. That’s a lesson in impermanence. It offers no shelter. That’s a lesson in suffering. The world has nothing of its own. That’s a lesson in not-self. But then it’s a slave to craving. It keeps coming back for these things that are constantly stressful and not-self. Because like John Muir, it sees this as the best, as good as it gets. So let’s go back for some more. The purpose of coming into nature and listening to nature is to remind you that if you want to find something really good in life, you’ve got to turn around and look inside your mind. When Maha Goswami talks about the joys of living in nature and the beauties of nature, it’s a point that once you’re sitting in nature, the constraints of human society are less and less. But instead of just staying there on the level of enjoying nature, you then have to turn inside and see where is this craving that keeps making me come back, just like all these animals, all these beings that keep coming back for more, coming back for more, more what? More inconstancy, stress, and not-self. What do I have inside that’s still driving me in that same direction? How can I learn how not to identify with it? This is why we train our minds. We get them still for the purpose of seeing deeper inside. What is our fascination with you coming back, coming back, coming back? We keep fabricating new experiences and they fall apart. We just keep fabricating more. When will we ever have enough? That’s when we realize that the world of enough is not found that way. It’s found deeper in with something that is not fabricated. So it’s always important to have that perspective. Otherwise you can listen to nature and look at nature and you can hear and see all the wrong things, things that simply aggravate more craving. So learn how to listen outside, learn how to look outside, and then turn around and look and listen inside to see why is it that you’re still a slave to craving? What is the allure of craving? Why can’t you see the drawbacks? This is when you can balance out the illusion of the allure and the drawbacks and really see deep down why it is you’re going for these things. When it really hits home that these things really do have drawbacks, that’s when you find the escape. In the romantic world of interconnectedness, there’s no escape. They look at nature and they listen to nature from that perspective, but the Buddha says there is an escape, something much better. So tune your ears right. Adjust your eyes so they’re right. Always keep in the back of the mind that there must be something better than this. It’s going to be found through fabricating the path, but the path itself is, even though it’s better than this, it’s not the ultimate. It shows its real value when it’s fabricated. It delivers you to something that’s unfabricated. When you find that, that’s when you get a genuine perspective on what’s going on around you here. Think about the Buddha on the night after his awakening, looking at the world. He saw beings on fire, slaves to craving, and all he could feel was compassion. And his compassion was pure, because he was no longer in a position where he had to feed on anything outside or feed on anything even inside. So if you want to have genuine compassion for the world, this is the perspective from which you develop it. As we’re on the path, we keep this in mind as a form of conviction. If you keep at it, someday that conviction will be verified. It’ll turn from conviction into knowledge. That’s when the mind is really secure. It’s found something that’s free from impermanence, free from stress and suffering, where issues of self and not-self don’t have any meaning anymore. That’s when you found something of genuine essence, something really solid and sure. you

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