

Purity of Heart

March 9, 2005

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, it gradually dawned on me that he could read my mind. And I began to notice that he had other unusual powers as well. He knew when things were going to happen in the future. And I must admit that it had me really fascinated. It opened whole new worlds of possibilities that I'd never really taken seriously before.

I guess he seemed to notice that my interest was heading off in that direction, so one evening he caught me up short. He said, "You know, the whole purpose of this practice is to find purity of heart. Everything else," he said, "is just games." And that teaching really went to my heart. It reminded me of why I was there: that what's really important in the practice is to make the heart pure.

What does it mean to have a pure heart? When the Buddha talks about purity, it's largely training yourself not to think or act or speak in ways that cause anyone any harm, either yourself or other people. So the next question is, *why* do we harm one another? Usually it's out of fear. It might be carelessness, but deep down inside there's an element of fear. You think you can trust yourself not to do anything bad, and then all of a sudden you find yourself threatened in one way or another, and your views start getting skewed. Things you ordinarily wouldn't want to do you suddenly find yourself doing or saying or thinking. It usually comes out of fear; you feel threatened. And once there's a threat, there's a re-ordering of your priorities as to what's really important.

So how are we threatened? Why is it that everybody seems to have a price? You push them far enough and they'd be willing to do all kinds of things that they know they shouldn't do. But they can convince themselves that it's okay in these circumstances. What are those circumstances that are so threatening?

I think it all comes down to the fact that, as they say in the very first question for the novices, all beings subsist on food. And "food," here, doesn't mean just physical food. Physical food is one type of food of course, but there's also the food of contact, the food of what's called intellectual intention, and the food of consciousness. These are the things that we feed on. The body feeds on physical food. The mind feeds on the three other kinds. We feel we need these things in order to survive; that's how we keep going as beings. And when our food source seems to be threatened, we react. In that way we're no different from dogs or other animals. You threaten their food and they're going to snarl and bite. When we feel that our food is threatened, we snarl and bite, too.

So, obviously, the issue of purifying the heart comes down to learning how not to have to depend on food. This goes deeply against the habits of the mind, which feeds on everything. You think of interconnectedness as being a good thing, but basically, inter-being is inter-eating. That's what conditionality is all about. In fact, if anything could be proof that we're *not* really one, just look at how beings feed on one another. No one is willingly food for anyone else unless they can feed in return. If we really were one, we wouldn't have to keep feeding on one another in order to exist. There's a taking, there's an oppressing, there's a making yourself a burden to other people that's involved in the feeding. And it's a burden for you, yourself, to be constantly worried about your source of food—so worried that you could end up killing and stealing and doing all kinds of other things that you know are not right.

So how do we get past feeding? That's the problem we have to solve if we want to purify the heart.

The first step is just to look at the process as it is, as a feeding process: to look at the kind of activities that are involved in feeding. And then, to wean ourselves off the need to feed, the Buddha teaches the right attitude we should have toward our food.

He illustrates the attitude we should adopt toward eating physical food with an analogy: the story of a couple who, with their baby son, are crossing a desert. They run out of food, and the question is: What are they going to do? They finally decide that two of them should survive instead of letting all three of them die. So they decide to kill the son and make his flesh into jerky, baby jerky. I'm sure it wouldn't sell anywhere. And then the Buddha asks: When they ate the baby jerky as they were going across the desert, would they eat it for fun or pleasure? The answer is: of course not. It would be just to keep the body going. And they would be crying, thinking about their son, that they had to do this.

So that's the attitude you should have toward physical food. Not only flesh eating, but all kinds of physical eating. Don't eat just for pleasure or for fun. There's always suffering involved in the process getting food to your mouth. The farmer suffers; the people who transport the goods suffer; there's work involved in fixing the food. It's just one, big hassle. So that's why we have that contemplation every day: We eat food not for the purpose of beautifying, nor for fun, but simply to keep the body alive and strong enough that we can practice all our life.

As for the food of sensory contact, so much of our life is spent in looking for enjoyable sensations. And when fear-mongers come along and say, "You'll die, you'll lose all your wealth, the economy will crash if you don't go along with our agenda," we give in because we're afraid of losing not only physical food, but also

food of sensory contact: the nice shows we watch, the nice clothing we can wear, all the things that feel good through the senses. The Buddha said to look at that kind of food as if you were a flayed cow, always exposed on all sides, so that no matter where you went, there would be little flies and gnats picking at your flesh. Trying to depend on this kind of contact for enjoyment is like hoping for pleasant sensations from the flies.

The food of intellectual intention, he said, is like being dragged off to a pit of burning coals, constantly on fire with this thought, that thought, wanting this, wanting that.

And as for the food of consciousness, he said to compare it to a man who's been caught by a king and is condemned to be speared in the morning with 100 spears. The king asks his henchmen, "Okay is he dead?" "No, he's not dead." "Okay, spear him again at noon with another hundred spears. Is he dead yet?" "No, not quite dead yet." "Okay, spear him again in the evening with another hundred spears." That's how the food of consciousness should be viewed.

The whole purpose of these contemplations is to turn your mind away from this kind of feeding. There seems to be a certain pleasure that comes from the way we normally feed, but when we look objectively at the process of having to feed, we see that it requires us to look all the time for more food, and there's so much suffering involved in the process.

The only way you can really see these kinds of feeding in this way is to make your mind really, really still, really quiet. In other words, use the breath as your food. This involves using the food of contact, intellectual intention, and consciousness, but you turn these things into good, strong states of concentration: a more harmless form of feeding. That way, you have something to compare: There's this kind of feeding, and then there's the ordinary kind of feeding that goes on out there in the world outside. Which would you rather be involved in? And when the mind is really still, there comes a sense of ease, rapture, and equanimity from the stillness. This not only gives you something to compare, but it also gives you a perspective on your life: Do you want to spend your whole life running around feeding in these ways, knowing that if you're dependent on things outside, you can't really trust yourself, you might have a price?

I saw this right after September 11th. So many Buddhist teachers caved in, wanting to ensure everyone that they weren't pacifists, that they saw the need for war, all because they feared they would lose their students. They wouldn't be popular. Seeing that was really dismaying. You have to ask yourself: Are you the sort of person who, when it comes to a certain threshold, is willing to cave in? To give in? To change your values? As long as you have to feed, there's always that

potential. And if you can't trust yourself, who can you trust—and what kind of life is that?

This is why we owe it to ourselves and to the people around us, the beings around us, to strengthen the mind even beyond the food of concentration, to the point where it doesn't need to feed anymore. We strengthen the mind in our conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. When these qualities are developed, the mind reaches the point where it doesn't have to depend on any kind of food at all for its happiness.

They say that arahants have understood food, and they're totally independent of nutriment, and, as a result, you can't trace their path, in the same way that you can't trace the path of birds in the sky. They can't be traced, but they are totally reliable, totally trustworthy, because nothing could happen that would make them change their values. That's because they don't depend on anything that could be affected by anything else.

Technically, you can't even call them beings anymore, because a being, as the Buddha said, is defined by where it's attached, where it's tied down, what it clings to. When there's no attachment, when there's no clinging, what's left can't be defined. That's another way in which the path of arahants can't be traced. It's not only their path that can't be traced—*they* can't be traced.

That's what it means to have purity of heart, and that's what this practice is all about. Everything else, as Ajaan Fuang said, is just games. And just as some games can be pleasant, some games can get cruel. The playful way in which some people feed can be very cruel.

So this is why purity of heart is such a worthwhile ideal. It's an important gift for ourselves and for the people around us.