

## *Worldly Dhammas*

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An important part of staying in a monastery like this is that it gets you outside of the normal concerns of society at large. Gain, status, praise, and sensual pleasure have a lot less meaning here than they do out there. When you can stay in a place where those things don't have much meaning, you get a better perspective on them.

These things are called worldly dhammas, and they're the qualities that make up the world. This is how the world functions. Material gain, status, praise, pleasure: These are the things that grease human society. And when you look at them, you realize that that's pretty much all human society has to offer. The problem is it has the opposite to offer as well. Where there's gain, there's going to be loss. Where there's status, there's loss of status. Where there's praise, there's criticism and censure. And where there's pleasure, there's pain. You can't have the good side without the bad side. The problem is that when the good side comes, we tend to identify with it, which means that when the bad side comes, we have to identify with that as well.

So it's good to come to a place where those identities really don't mean much. One of the things I've always appreciated about being with Ajaan Fuang at the monastery in Rayong was that it was like a large extended family. There were some very wealthy supporters and some very poor supporters. Some people would work Friday evening—a very low-paying job at a factory someplace—and drive out. They didn't have much money to offer, but they had their labor, they had their strength. So they'd offer that. But everybody was welcome. It was like a large extended family. The very wealthy people, the very poor people, people with rank, the people is no rank at all: When they came to the monastery, all that stuff was set aside. They were all part of the family.

In fact, it's one of the good features about having the monastic Sangha in Thailand as a whole: There's always an alternative society where, in its better centers, the things that have a lot of meaning in lay life don't have any meaning at all. As a result, people can go to a place where their ordinary everyday identities don't matter, don't hold. That makes it a lot easier to see that these ordinary everyday things are simply roles that you play. You can learn to see the whole thing as a game.

What's even better is if you can maintain that perspective even when you're in the middle of the game. This is what meditation does. It gets you in touch with a

different level of reality. It's like tuning your radio to a different station. The breath that's the energy flow in the body: What does it know of gain? What does it know of status? What does it know praise or criticism, any of those worldly affairs? It keeps coming in, going out, whether you're rich or poor. The subtle breath sensations keep moving around the body and they can be totally unaffected by any of that other stuff. When you keep in touch with them, when you keep tuned in to them, they help you pull out of those identities you hold fast to: "This is my status, this is my seniority, this is my material wealth, this is my role in society," where that sense of "my role" begins to bleed over into "me."

But if you stay in touch with the breath or any the other elements in the body—the fire element, which is the warmth; the water element, which is the coolness that permeates body; the earth element, the sense of solidity; space, both around the body and permeating between the atoms; and the element of consciousness: When you look at things simply as elements or as elementary properties or potentials, the affairs of world seem far away.

The trick is to be able to maintain this level of awareness in all your activities, so that you begin to look at the affairs of the world, not so much as being yours, but simply as things that come your way, and you can learn how to use them. Gain has its uses; loss also has its uses. It's great for developing a sense of samvega, a sense of dispassion, and it's good for knowing who your true friends are. When gain comes, you can use it to be generous, to develop compassionate qualities of the mind. Rather than identifying with it, you can see: "Where does it come from, where does it go, and in the meantime, what good use can I get out of it?"

When you come right down to it, these things are not really yours—never have been, never will. You have money, but it doesn't have your picture on it. It has George Washington or Ben Franklin. You gain status, but it's something people give to you, so it's something people can take away. This is even clearer with praise and criticism. It comes out of their mouths, not yours.

So when you can step back a bit to have a different perspective on these things, and can begin to see that gain is good for this or that, but you also have to watch out for its dangers. Loss is good for this or that, and so on, all the way down with all four pairs. Each side of each pair has its uses. Learn to see them all as part of a causal chain. Pleasure comes from this, leads to that. If you get stuck on it, it's going to lead to certain states of mind. If you learn how to use the pleasure as a means of getting the mind to settle down, then it can have another effect, a more useful effect. You can actually get something solid out of it. The same with pain. The Buddha said the pain is a noble truth. It's something that you can learn a lot from.

When you can look at both sides in this way, you don't get elated when the good side comes or depressed when the bad side comes. You simply realize that the pendulum has swung in this direction, and this is what you get to gain from it when it's in this direction. When it's in the other direction, you get to gain other things. And it's a lot easier to maintain this perspective, one, when you have a monastery like this to come to, or you can go out into the wilds. And two, when you can carry this perspective around with you just by getting in touch with the breath or the other elements of body.

The Buddha has a passage where he talks about the wind element. As he says, the wind blows disgusting things, but does the wind get disgusted? No, it just blows them around. When it blows fragrant things, does it get excited and enchanted? No, it just blows them around. The same with water, fire, and earth. Fire can burn disgusting things or fragrant things, but the fire doesn't care. You can throw disgusting things on the earth, but the earth doesn't wrinkle up its nose or pull away in disgust. When you use water to wash things away, the water doesn't care whether they're clean or not, nice or not.

Try to tune your mind in to that attitude. As the Buddha says, make your mind in tune with the breath. Make your mind in tune with fire, water, earth. You can also make it in tune with space, or with the simple knowing quality in the mind. If you can maintain this type of perception, it really frees you from a lot of unskillful behavior and a lot of unnecessary ups and downs.

So do your best to learn how to tune in to this level and stay tuned in. It's good that you can pull out every now and then, but if you can stay tuned in here all the time, you've really got the advantage. The ways of the world can spin around you, but you don't get sucked into their spinning. After all, when they spin around, it's not just a ball bearing spinning around smoothly, it's more like gears. They spin around and around, and if you get your shirt or your sleeve caught in the teeth of the gears, they will pull you in, pull you in, and the gears can kill you. But if nothing gets caught in the gears, you're perfectly safe.

The breath doesn't get caught, so stay with the breath. Make the mind in tune with the breath. Then nothing can pull you in, and nothing can cause you harm.