

Step Outside the World

April 19, 2006

My first morning in Thailand many years ago, I looked down from my hotel window to the street below and I caught sight of a woman putting food in a monk's bowl. I'd seen documentaries of people putting food in monks' bowls, and it was presented as something that everybody does in Thailand, a natural part of Thai culture, but actually seeing it happen was a very different experience. To me it looked like a subversive act. It was a market street, and it wasn't the case that everybody in the market was putting food in the monks bowls. It was just that one woman and that one monk. He came up, she came out with the food, put it in his bowl. They didn't say a word, and he slipped back into the crowd.

It looked subversive. And it was. There is a subversive aspect to the Buddha's teachings. The monk stood for a totally different set of values from the market. Everybody in the market was buying and selling, and women were hawking their wares. This was something different. It was a gift. What the monk wore, the way he looked, represented a very different set of values. And here was a woman in the market supporting that set of values.

Later, as I got to know the forest tradition, it reinforced the sense of the forest tradition being something separate from Thai culture, standing outside a little bit. At present, people go over to Thailand, and the forest tradition is part of their introduction to Thai Buddhism. The forest tradition is now part of the general picture of Thai culture. But back when I was with Ajaan Fuang, it was before the forest tradition had become very popular. And the way he lived was something outside the culture. His values were very different from any other Thai person I'd ever met. He represented the customs of the noble ones, which is a very different set of customs from those of ordinary society.

Ajaan Mun used to be attacked for the way he practiced. Again, we think of the forest tradition as being an integral part of Thai culture, but when Ajaan Mun started out, he was bucking a huge trend, a huge established tradition. The way he practiced the dhutanga practices, the way he wore his robes, the fact that he practiced out in the forest, was all very different from the general tradition of Thai Buddhism.

And people would attack him for it. They'd say, "Why don't you behave the way other people do? Why don't follow our good Thai or Lao customs?" And he would say, "Thai customs, Lao customs, the customs of any country: These are the customs of people with defilements, the customs of people who suffer, stuck in

suffering. I want to follow the customs of the noble ones: those who have gained release from suffering. The way they behave, the standards they set, those are the ways I want to follow.”

And it was because he didn't let himself get sucked into the ordinary values of the culture that he was able to succeed. He established something that stood apart.

This principle is one of the things that keeps Thai culture healthy: the fact that it has room for a whole set of values that stand apart. And as people begin to practice the Dhamma here in the West, we have to learn that same principle as well. We have to learn how to stand apart.

After all, there is that passage we chanted just now, the one that says, “The world is swept away.” If we let ourselves get sucked into the world, we get swept away along with it. When aging comes, we get swept away with aging. Illness comes, death comes, we get swept away with these things. We have to learn how to stand outside.

So even though we're aware of the world and participate in the world, we're not *in* the world. That's when we are safe. That's when we can be free from being swept away.

One of the words in the Buddha's vocabulary, *bhava*, shows the connection between how we approach worlds outside and how we approach worlds in our mind. On the external level, we live in our *bhava*, a state of becoming on the sensual level: the human level. On the internal level, we create worlds in our mind. You can see it happen. It's like little bubbles forming in your mind or in the general area of your body: There's a whole world in each bubble. You go into it, and suddenly you find that that's not a bubble in your body: You're *in* the bubble now.

And it can take you. It can float off in different directions, like a kite with its string cut. It can float off in any direction and come down who knows where. If you let yourself get sucked into the bubble, you're in for trouble. As a meditator, you have to learn how to stand outside, to see the process of the bubble forming, and then you can notice whether there's anything there worth going with or not. Some of our thoughts really are worthwhile. There are things we have to do, things we have to say, things we have to plan for. But a lot of our thoughts are just random bubbles. Some of them are actually harmful.

For the most part, people just let themselves get sucked into whatever comes up and attracts their attention. They go with it without asking where it's going to go. It's like getting onto a train without asking where the train is going to go. Just jump on the train and go wherever it takes you.

That kind of living is dangerous, yet that's the way most of us live. We let ourselves get sucked into these worlds, wherever they might take us. They get swept away and we find we have nothing of our own in there. They give us no shelter. And they're never satisfactory. Some of them are useful, but in and of themselves, they don't provide any real satisfaction.

So we have to develop strong powers of mindfulness and concentration to withstand this tendency of going into these worlds. Mindfulness is actually nurtured by of three things: mindfulness, alertness, and ardency.

Mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind. You establish a frame of reference, such as the body in and of itself. In other words, it's not the body as it relates to the world, but just the body in and of itself, as you experience it right here on its own terms. Or your frame of reference can be feelings in and of themselves—simply the arising of a feeling, its passing away—or mind states or mental qualities.

You choose a frame of reference and you stay there. These are the topics of concentration. As I said this morning, the Buddha didn't draw a clear line between mindfulness practice and concentration practice. They shade into each other. The four establishings of mindfulness are the themes of concentration. And as I said, the qualities that establish mindfulness include not only mindfulness itself but also alertness—knowing what you're doing, knowing the results of what you're doing—together with ardency, the ability to stick with it, to put effort into the practice to be skillful, the effort to be sensitive, the effort to be focused.

When these are all working together, they slide very naturally into concentration practice. The Buddha often talks about how the four establishings of mindfulness lead naturally into the seven factors for awakening, which are the factors of concentration: mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity. Mindfulness leads you there, and then when you get to the fourth jhana—where you've got the last two factors for awakening—you've got purity of mindfulness. That's the only place where mindfulness is really pure.

At the same time, the mind is really solid. It's firmly in its frame of reference: the body as a whole, from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes, with the breath still, and the mind in equanimity.

This is the frame of reference where you can see these bubbles of little worlds coming up in the mind and you don't necessarily have to get sucked into them. It's like driving past a drive-in theater. You have your choice. As you drive past, you look at the screen and you suddenly realize that's Rhet Butler, that's Scarlet O'Hara, and you get sucked into the story. You're gone with the wind. Or you can

see it simply as colors, flashes of light flashing on the screen: red, yellow, green, white.

Looking at it the first way is dangerous. You can drive off the road. Looking at it the second way, you see that this is all it is—just flashes of color—and yet people can cry and laugh and get all excited by these flashes of color. It gives you a sense of *samvega*, a sense of dispassion. And that's safe.

So when your foundation is really solid—mindful, alert, ardent, fully aware of the body, with mindfulness immersed in the body—you can stand outside those worlds in the same way you can stand outside the world outside. You've got a place where you can observe what's going on. You can watch the values of society and you can ask yourself, "Do I really want to go there? Do I really want to get sucked in to that thought world?"

You can look at society as a whole and see how futile it is: all the clamoring and time spent in getting and spending, a society that conspires to take people who are blatantly selfish—filled with greed, anger, and delusion—and put them in power and praise them. Is this a society you really want to get sucked into? You step back even further to look at the whole human condition: Is this something you really want to be sucked into?

Now, it may seem heartless to step outside this way, but it's not. After all, the Buddha stepped outside, but he had the compassion to help other people get out as well. It's not that he just turned his back on the world and ran away.

There's a famous retelling of the Buddha's story in Thai, and a major part of the story is devoted to how the Buddha, after his awakening, went back home, taught the Dhamma to the rest of his family, and many of them became arahants.

A lot of people focus on how horrible it was that Prince Siddhartha left his wife and his son, but they forget to notice that he came back and taught his wife to be an arahant. He raised his son, and when his son became mature, reached adulthood, he became an arahant as well. Very few fathers can do that for their family.

So having this place in mind where you really are solid puts you in a really safe position, and also in a position of strength. You can use that strength both to help yourself and to help other people. Like the woman in the market, you have one foot in each world.

Or to be more precise, you've got both feet outside the world, but you can reach in when you need to and offer another perspective. Having this outside perspective helps you keep your mental health, and other people who pick up on it gain a measure of health as well.

So this subversive act that we're doing here, stepping outside world, is not the sort of subversive act that destroys the world like anarchism, or terrorism. It's actually an act of kindness. After all, the Buddha is often compared to a doctor who heals the illnesses of the world. The reason he was able to heal them was because he was able to step outside them, gain release from them, and then show the way out to other people, too.

What this means is that this practice we have here of meditating, learning how to step outside our thought worlds by creating a good foundation for the mind: This principle works with the world outside as well. We can step outside of it by staying with the same inner foundation, having respect for it, maintaining it, sustaining it, making it the place where we take our stand. That way, when worlds get swept away, we're not swept away along with them. And we're not part of the confusion that gets other people swept away as well.

That right there is a real gift.