

Think Like a Thief

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When I went back to Thailand to ordain, one of the first things Ajaan Fuang said to me was that if I want to learn the Dhamma, I was going to have to learn how to think like a thief. In other words, I couldn't expect to have everything explained, everything handed to me on a platter. If I wanted to learn the Dhamma, I had to be observant.

After all, how does a thief think? Suppose a thief is planning to rob a house. He can't go up and knock on the door and ask the owners of the house when they're going to be away so that he can conveniently come in and steal what they have. He has to case the joint, hide out, watch, see when they come, see when they go, what doors they leave open, what windows they leave open, where they keep their valuables. Only then can he have any hope of stealing their valuables and getting away.

And there was a purpose in what Ajaan Fuang said. He wasn't just playing a game. After all, one of the basic skills you need as a meditator is to be observant. You're not going to gain discernment simply by following directions. There are meditation techniques that give you directions, that say, "Do this, do that," and somehow automatically you're going to gain insight just by following the directions. It's like expecting to get genuine food out of a food processing plant. What you end up with is meditation-product, like the food-products that have so little food that they have to by law label themselves as food-product.

You get the semblance of discernment, the semblance of insight, but not the real thing. The real thing has to come from within, your own sensitivity, your own ability to notice things. That's in Aristotle's definition of intelligence: the ability to see connections that nobody else has pointed out to you.

That, after all, was what the Buddha did on the night of his awakening. He saw connections that nobody else has ever pointed out to him, connections between craving, ignorance, and stress and suffering. All those connections of dependent co-arising are things he observed because he thought like a thief, didn't expect the truth to be handed to him on a platter. The thing is the truth is there, to be seen at all times, if only you have the mind to observe it.

So as I stayed with Ajaan Fuang, it wasn't just a matter listening Dhamma talks. In fact, he gave very few Dhamma talks. You could probably count all the Dharma talks I heard from him during those ten years on the fingers of two hands. If you he asked him a question, he would give you an answer. Sometimes

the answers were detailed when he felt that you needed a long explanation, and other times they were very short. Sometimes he wouldn't answer at all, and leave you go back and think out the answer.

This is the way Ajaan Lee trained them. When you look at the ajaans who talked about their time with Ajaan Mun, that was how Ajaan Mun taught his students as well. He wanted them to be observant, to learn and think and observe on their own.

So keep this point in mind. You have to learn how to use your eyes and ears in new ways. As the chant pointed out just now, most of us use our eyes and ears as flamethrowers. What we see, what we hear, is only what fits in with our own ideas, what fits in with our greed, anger, and delusion. In other words, there's actually more coming out our ears and eyes than there is coming in, more in terms of suppositions, preconceptions, liking and disliking. Even when we try to be perfectly nonreactive, the fires of delusion come out our eyes. Those we tend to miss. As the Buddha said, in equanimity and non-reactivity there is what he calls the *asava*, or effluent, of ignorance. Even though we think that we're being very calm, we still don't see anything because there's more deluded energy going out our eyes than there is information coming in.

As with so many things in the Buddha's path, what we have to do is take our eyes which we've been using the wrong way, taking our ears, every one of our senses, and apply them to a new use, learning how to be observant in a way that can put an end to suffering. This starts with learning how to observe our own actions and the results of our actions, and observing the teacher. Maybe not everything the teacher does is an embodiment of the Dhamma, but there's a lot there that is. So it's for you to figure out, which is the Dhamma, which is not, which is a good lesson, and which is not.

If you don't take an interest in this, then all the Dhamma that's been displayed around all the time goes to waste. Not only the teacher's behavior, but the behavior of everything around you, in terms of cause and effect, is being proclaimed at all times, and yet you don't notice. You're too busy throwing flames with your senses, throwing flames with the mind. Sometimes only you're the one burned, but sometimes it goes out and burns people around you.

So think about this: How to use your eyes? It all starts with your intentions. Are you using your eyes simply for enjoyment or are you using them to learn, to observe? The same principle applies with all your senses. The mind spends so much time creating worlds for itself. This is what's called the process of becoming. Can you turn around and devote it to the project of learning how to understand the process of becoming so that you can put an end to it? It all comes down to

your intention. Do you really want to see, or do you just want to play with your likes and dislikes?

This is an important issue. As we come to practice the Dhamma, our true happiness is at stake. This is what the Buddha's teachings are: the serious pursuit of true happiness. What gets in the way is our old ways of pursuing of happiness, the ones that we're used to, that don't give very satisfactory results, which is why we're here trying to find something better. But even then, we keep falling back into our old ways, seeing what we want to see, not seeing what we don't want to see.

As a result, the Dhamma that's being proclaimed all the time in the behavior of everything around you doesn't have a chance to get in. There's too much energy flowing out the senses, and not much coming in.

So this is what makes all the difference: a willingness to be observant, a willingness to learn new things. After all, as the Buddha said, this is a project where we're trying to attain what we've never attained before, to see what we've never seen before, to realize when we've never realized before. And if you simply keep looking at things the old way, acting the old way, thinking the old way, nothing new has a chance to come on.

So try to get some control over this flame producer, this fire producer. It's the Buddha's image for clinging. When you say the word clinging, it call to mind the idea that we've got a hand that's holding on to an object. Clinging is actually the defined as desire-passion for activities. If you feel desire or passion for form, feeling, perception, thought formations, consciousness, all of which are activities, you feed off of these things the way the fire feeds off fuel. And you get stuck on these things the way fire stuck in its fuel.

The basic image the Buddha uses here, as you know, is in the word *nibbāna*. It refers to a fire going out. When it goes out, it's freed because it lets go, stops doing the activity of clinging to its fuel. It's an end of a process that causes suffering.

So if you want to see that freedom, you have to look at this habit the mind has of clinging to things, wanting them to be a certain way and, as a result, not seeing what's there to be seen at all times. The Dhamma is said to be *akālika*: It's present all the time, but we're not looking. We're too busy churning out fires. Even our equanimity is a fire, because it's bound up with ignorance. The one way to get around that is to make up your mind that you want to be very, very observant, to think like a thief, not because the Dhamma isn't being freely offered—after all, it *is* being freely offered, it's there all the time—but because it's only by thinking like a thief that can you get around your old habit of not wanting to see it.

So this way if you actually can get around those old habits, then your eyes and ears, nose, and tongue, body and mind, instead of being channels for defilement, become around and becomes channels of knowledge. That's how we see and realize or attain what we've never seen or realized to attain ed before.