

# *Before Your Face Was Born*

*October 8, 2006*

Back when I was in grade school, my mother was chairman of the local school board. It wasn't much of a school: just three classrooms, grades one through eight, sixty kids in the school. My first grade teacher, also second and third grade teacher, would stop by at the house every now and then after school to talk things over with my mother. One day they got onto the topic of religion. My teacher was Roman Catholic, and she said something that even when I was six years old sounded odd. She said, "Well, if being Catholic doesn't make you better than other people, what good is it?"

When you stop and think about it, that's what a lot of people do in this world. They do something because they think it makes them better than other people. Sometimes really crazy things—and often the crazier the activity, the more they have to justify it by saying that it makes them better than other people. That whole mindset—the idea that there are people who are better than others or worse than others or equal to others—is a real trap because it tends to swing you back and forth between extremes: either exaggerated self-esteem or exaggerated self-hatred, back and forth, back and forth. And either extreme can make you miserable because the idea of self, of who you are, becomes the big issue in life. You have to do everything you can to shore it up. Then when you find yourself doing things that are not up to that high standard, you feel like a failure.

It's good to remind yourself that all those issues are useless. They don't accomplish anything at all. They are what Ajaan Maha Boowa calls the fangs of unawareness, the fangs of ignorance: this whole issue of conceit.

So remember: We're here meditating not because it makes us better than anybody else, but simply because we want to be happy, and we want to have a happiness that's worth the effort that goes into it. We know that for our happiness to last, it has to be a happiness that doesn't harm anybody else. So we're compassionate to others—again, not because it makes us a better person, but because it leads to true happiness. When you keep the issue close to the ground in that way, you don't have to go swinging back and forth between extremes of self-esteem or self-hatred. You can focus simply on the question of whether your happiness is true.

Think back on the forest tradition. It was started by sons of peasants up in northeast Thailand, which is the poorest part of the country. And one of the issues Ajaan Mun found himself dealing with again and again was students feeling that they didn't have what it takes to really do the practice. He kept reminding them: You've got a human body and you've got a mind that doesn't want to suffer. That's all you really need. As for how well you're going to do in the practice, you start where you are.

This is one of the reasons why we have the recollection of the Sangha to set our standards right. You look at all the people who've been practicing: There have been men, women, and children; rich people, poor people; healthy people, sick people. And what do they have in common? They wanted true happiness and they were willing to do what it takes. That's all you really need in the practice.

The question of whether this makes you better than anyone else is not an issue. That issue of pride tends to come in when you do crazy things and then have to justify them to yourself. You look at all the rituals and rules that used to be a big part of religion, and still are part of a lot of religions: They make no sense at all. And yet people keep on doing them because they have the idea that these things make them better than other people. The more unreasonable the rule or ritual, the better they are for their willingness to submit to it. It makes no sense at all.

So fortunately in the Buddha's teachings, we don't have rules like that. There are a fair number of rules but they make sense. You think of the Buddha himself prior to his Awakening: When he was trying to find the path, he spent six long years in austerities. And what can keep you going through six long years of austerities? The idea that the austerities make you better than other people. That's what kept him going for six years. But then he realized: All those sacrifices were really for nothing. When you can admit that to yourself—that what you thought made you special was really a waste of time—that's when you learn humility. And when you learn humility, you're ready to learn what you really need to know.

So it's good to come to the practice with an attitude of humility. We've been making mistakes all along. It's good to be able to admit the mistakes and to realize that, Yes, the mind does need training. Ok, here is an opportunity to do it. A lot of my training with Ajaan Fuang consisted of his pointing out to me where my weak points were. He wasn't doing it all the time, but he did it at strategic times. He once commented on how Westerners are very stubborn. I had to reflect, well, how many Westerners had he ever met in his life? I think I was the only one.

So that was the prime lesson I had to learn: how not to be stubborn, and especially not stubborn in trying to shore up my exaggerated sense of myself. And it really helped. I found myself having to do things that I knew I wasn't really good at. When he was sick, I had to look after him. I wasn't especially good at it, but there was nobody else there. Even though I wasn't doing a perfect job, it was better than nobody helping him at all. That thought was enough to keep me going. So finding myself spending a lot of time working on tasks that I wasn't automatically good at was very good for me. I learned a lot.

So it's important that you come to the meditation without the idea that you're already going to excel at it. In fact one of Ajaan Fuang's strongest terms of criticism was for somebody who thought he was already good before he had even tried it. *Ruu kawn koed, loed kawn tham* was his phrase. You know about things before they happen, and you're excellent before you've even tried your hand. That attitude, he said, sets you up for a fall. All that's asked is that you realize you're suffering, you realize your actions are the important cause for your suffering, and you're willing to learn. Any attitudes that go beyond that set you up for a fall.

This is why right view focuses on the issue of suffering. There's no question about making you a better person. It's simply a matter of seeing where there's suffering and where there's a cause of suffering. That motivation goes a lot deeper than your self-image. When you were a little baby, you didn't have a self-image, but you did know you were suffering and you tried to figure out some way to stop it.

So try to dig back into that attitude: That's your face before you were born. You weren't concerned about your face or what it looked like, or what other people would think about what it looked like. There was just that plain old issue of suffering and you knew that something had to be done about it. Well, here's a path to do something about it. So dig back into that attitude—even before your face was born. There was just the issue of suffering and the need to overcome it. When you have that attitude, that's all you really need. And the questions of who you are or how your performance as a meditator reflects on you: Those are thoughts to put aside. It's not the case that we don't pass judgment on our actions, but don't let the issue of who you are or how good you are become the object of judgment.

There's a difference between being judgmental and being judicious. Judgmental is when you're impatient and you want to come to a decision really fast without putting any effort into finding out the facts of the case. That's judgmentalism. It's harmful. It can lead to a lot of unskillful behavior. Being judicious is when you look at an action to see: Does this action really help put an end to suffering or does it cause more suffering? You look at the results and then adjust your next action accordingly. You're not here to judge you as a person; you're here to judge your actions and learn from them. That's being judicious, and that's where your powers of evaluation, your faculty of judgment, really are appropriate.

When the issue of your identity or your self-image gets in the way, put it aside. If you find it hard to put it aside, don't say, "This is something really wrong with me," for that gets you into a tailspin. Don't worry about that. Just notice each time it comes and then say, "I know this one; I know where it goes," and do your best to let it go. That's when you can focus on the issue at hand, which is the fact that there is suffering, but there is a potential, there is a path to put an end to it. You've got the opportunity to follow that path. That's all that really matters.