

In Earnest

September 7, 2009

The Buddha was a very earnest teacher. He saw there was a real problem in life, the suffering—everybody's suffering.

There's one point where he says he had a vision of the world before his awakening. It was of a puddle drying up, and there were fish in the puddle, lots of fish in the puddle, and they were struggling with one another to get what little bit of water was left in the puddle. But the water was going to dry out, dry out, dry out, and here they were struggling with one another. It gave rise to a real sense of dismay.

But then he realized that the problem wasn't out there. The problem was in here. He said it was an arrow buried in the heart. Once that arrow could be removed, then there would be no more suffering. The arrow was clinging, craving—all the factors that give rise to suffering. And it takes a full-blown effort to pull that arrow out. It's not something you do lightly, in your spare time. It's got to take top priority in your life.

Even after his awakening, the Buddha said he saw the world as being on fire. He'd been experiencing the bliss of release for seven weeks and then came back to consider the world. He saw all the beings of the world on fire with the fevers of passion, aversion, and delusion. The goal of his teaching was to help people put those fires out.

It's an image that recurs again and again in his teaching. He says you want to practice as if your head or your turban were on fire. In other words, you don't wait around. You can't say, "I'll do it when it's convenient," or, "I'll do it when I'm in the mood." The fact is that your head is on fire right now and it's burning right now. So you've got to do what you can to put it out right now. That's the kind of teaching the Buddha gave. That's the kind of teacher he was. He was very earnest in everything he said.

I was reading today about the concept of irony in Romantic poetry. We don't tend to think of the Romantics as being ironic. They seem all very sincere: throwing themselves onto the infinity of nature, soaking up the infinity. But one of the Romantic thinkers said that it's because they'd had a sense of the infinite and they'd also seen how inadequate their poems were to express the infinite that they were always in an ironic relationship with their art. They felt they had to create art as the best way of expressing the infinite to one another, but always with the sense that it was totally inadequate.

You see that in some teachers nowadays. They talk about the infinite, but then they look at what they've got in their minds and it's all pretty inadequate. I remember reading about a teacher who'd said that she would go through periods when she'd wonder if all this Buddhist business was just a bunch of crock, there was no truth to it at all. She wrote this down in a book,

and people praised her for being honest, without thinking that here she was, making money off of selling something that she didn't really know was good or not.

That's not the kind of teacher the Buddha was. He was earnest. He knew that he'd found something that really worked. He wasn't trying to express the infinite. He was focusing on the fact that there is a problem. There is suffering and there is something you can do about it. If you don't do anything about it, you're just going to keep on suffering. So you've got to keep your priorities straight as to what's really important in life. It's very easy for us to distract ourselves with other issues, to busy ourselves with other activities and forget the fact that our heads are still on fire. There's nobody else to put the fire out, and it's not going to go out on its own.

Passion, aversion, and delusion have a way of feeding on one another. Unlike the fires of the earth, this one never seems to run out of fuel. It's up to you to pull the fuel away, to put the fires out. The image in the Canon is that fire is constantly feeding. The word *upadana* for clinging also means to take sustenance. And the main images in the Buddha's teaching on clinging focus on this element of feeding. On the one hand, there's the clinging in the image of the field of karma. Every plant that grows in the field of your karma comes from the seed of consciousness and is watered by your clinging and craving. It's feeding off of that water. And it's feeding off of the soil of your actions. As for fire, it feeds, too. It feeds off of its fuel and it clings to its fuel at the same time.

So you have to look at where you're feeding and ask yourself, "Is it really worth it?" We tend to think of feeding as a good thing. We're hungry and then we find something to feed on and that ends our hunger. But look at the food of the world: Does it really end your hunger? It assuages it for a while and then you're hungry again. And some of the things we feed on actually make us more hungry.

That's how they design a lot of junk food. It gets compulsive: You keep feeding and feeding, and for some reason you feel more and more hungry the more you feed. If the food itself doesn't make you hungrier, they wrap it up in all kinds of advertising to make you want to eat more. Like those little chocolates that come in wrappers that tell you to indulge yourself, to take a moment for yourself, i.e., to eat more chocolate. Think about the people who write those messages. Do they really believe that it's good for you to eat more chocolate? Or do they just want to make money off of sparking your desires, taking advantage of your greed, aversion, and delusion?

If you actually look at the activity of feeding, it's pretty dismaying. You yourself are put to difficulties in order to get the food, and the food is never totally reliable. In other words, there's no guarantee of an infinite food source. And your life is limited by where you find your food.

Many of the times when I've felt the desire just to wander off into the wilderness. You feel this especially when you go to a place that's really beautiful, say, like Zion Canyon. You'd like to wander off into the side canyons for days on end, but you're always pulled back by the fact

that you need food in order to survive. As a ranger there once said, “You can’t eat the scenery.” The longer you want to wander, the more food you have to carry around.

Then, of course, you think about the things that are being fed on. Even if you have a vegetarian diet, there are the farmers and other workers that have to get the food from the soil to you. And they all suffer. That’s just physical food. Then there’s mental food, our emotional food. We feed off our relationships but we know our relationships can’t last. We feed off our ideas of ourselves, all the different forms of clinging: sensuality, views, habits and practices, views about who we are. We feed on these things but they keep changing on us and never really provide any real sustenance. They just bring more and more suffering.

This is why the Buddha said to feed the mind in a different way, a way that gets it so strong that eventually you don’t have to feed anymore. The five strengths—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment—are healthy food for the mind, food that teaches it to be more and more independent, less and less reliant on its old kinds of feeding, its old kinds of food.

When you think of the image of feeding—that it’s not just you gobbling down stuff but you’re also on fire—it makes it more and more imperative to develop these kinds of food. You really want to give your life to this practice.

Try to live your life in a way that you minimize the duties and the entanglements you take on. Although we all do have our responsibilities, we want to wear them as lightly as possible. Ajaan Fuang once said there’s the internal *wat* and the external *wat*. *Wat* in Thai has two meanings: It means monastery but also means your duties. He said there are times when you have to make the choice: Are you going to follow the external ones, the monastery, or the internal ones, the duties in training your mind? And he said always to give priority to the internal ones.

As for the external ones, you know that the world outside is never going to be perfect. So you do your duties in a way that develops more energy, that develops your habit for being energetic and for being responsible in your actions. But if you find that the external ones are sapping your strength for your internal duties, then you’ve got to drop them, realize the limitations of what you can take on outside.

So remember: You’ve got to keep your priorities clear. You’ve got to be earnest in your practice. We’re not doing this in an ironic way; we’re not doing this in a playing-at-it kind of way. Ajaan Lee has a good talk about people who simply play at the practice. He says they’re like monkeys that are dressed-up to put on a monkey show, but it’s still just a monkey show, no matter how fancy the dress. It’s a pretty harsh image.

I remember the story that the Buddha tells about those former Brahmas who come down as the world is beginning to evolve. They leave the Brahma world and they’re radiant, they float over the face of the waters, feeding on rapture. But then they begin to notice a film developing on the water. It has the color of ghee. And one of them in a careless, wanton moment says,

“What’s this like?” and he tastes it. It tastes like pure wild honey. So he starts falling on it, gobbling it down, smitten with the taste. The other Brahmas see that and so they try it, too, they like it, too, and they start fighting over the ghee. As they do that, they lose their self-luminosity, they no longer have the rapture they fed on before. The Sun and the Moon appear and the world begins to develop in a negative way. All because of their carelessness and wantonness, when they said, “Wouldn’t *this* be fun? Wouldn’t *that* be fun?”

There are people who complain that if you’re really serious about the practice you lose your spontaneity. Well, spontaneity may have its good side but it has its bad side as well. You want to be really careful, you have to be heedful, your actions do have consequences, you can’t pretend that they don’t. As for the pleasure in the practice, the Buddha says it’s loaded there in the practice of right concentration. If you want to find joy and spontaneity, look there.

As for your other actions, you have to be very careful to be restrained. Otherwise, you end up doing and saying and thinking things that you later regret. And that regret is very hard to get rid of. Especially as life goes on and you don’t see any progress coming in your practice, you begin to wonder, “What’s this all about? What have I been doing?” Don’t be the sort of person who realizes that a lot of time was wasted, a lot of time was thrown away. After all, we don’t have an infinite amount of time. The conditions here may not be perfect but they’re good enough for the practice. You want to take advantage of them while you have them.

And be earnest in the practice, because after all, suffering is earnest, too. It’s not just playing around. As Ajaan Maha Boowa once said of Ajaan Mun, he looked at him and he knew immediately that here was an earnest person, the sort of person who could scare away his defilements just through his earnestness. That’s the only way you’re going to get past them.