

Count Your Blessings

January 14, 2010

We sit here together, we're all on the same hilltop, and yet each of us is in a separate world.

Each of us is experiencing our own suffering, our own pleasures, our own stress. And although there's a basic pattern that underlies the way we're experiencing these things, still, your suffering, your pains, are yours. You're experiencing your pleasures, I'm experiencing mine, and we can know each other's only by extrapolation.

As Ajaan Fuang once commented, there's a certain loneliness to the practice. You're working with your own problems; the person next to you is working on hers. It can seem very lonely, especially when you're not sitting here together, or when you're sitting off on your own someplace else surrounded by people who have very different values.

In fact, it's often lonelier when you're surrounded by people with different values than it is when you're just sitting by yourself. You feel strange. You feel either unappreciated or misunderstood. Or you begin to wonder if you're not sane, and they're the sane ones—you have no real idea when things seem topsy-turvy.

But there is a kind of comfort that comes when you stop to think about all the other people who are practicing, even though they're practicing on their own sufferings. There is a kind of fellowship that stretches around the world, that stretches back thousands of years. It's good to tap into that when you can.

I noticed this a lot in Thailand, when, being the only Westerner in the monastery, there were times when I felt that even Ajaan Fuang didn't understand some of the stuff I was going through. I talked to some of the Thai people, and they seemed to be in very different worlds. But we did have certain values in common, and that created a sense of fellowship, a sense of strength. Tapping into that is a wise thing.

It's very easy to focus on the things that make the practice difficult for you. The more you focus on the difficulties, the harder it gets, and the more you tie yourself up. So it's good to stop and think about the things that make it easy.

You notice this if you take a long walk, either doing walking meditation or going out for a hike. If you start focusing on the parts of the body that hurt, that are sore, that feel tired, it gets harder and harder and harder to walk. But if you focus on the areas that are comfortable, that are not feeling tired, the parts that are

feeling energetic, then you can walk for longer periods of time.

So this is one of the important skills that enable you to develop stamina in the practice: to focus on the areas where you do have advantages, where you do have comforts, where you do have things going well. And take strength from those. Take comfort from them.

You might compare yourself, say, with the forest ajaans and think about how they grew up in a society that supported them—they grew up with values that were conducive to the practice, they entered the monastic Sangha, which was a huge support—and you can tell yourself, “I don’t have all those advantages.”

But then again, if you grow up in Thai society, there are a lot of things that are actually contrary to Buddhist values. And because everything gets swept together into Buddhism over there, there a lot of people who really can’t sort things out which part is Animistic, which part is Brahmanical, which part is Buddhist. That takes a lot of sorting out once you start practicing.

We don’t have that particular difficulty. There are a lot of other difficulties over there, too. You think about the ajaans out in the forest when it’s raining, when it’s cold, when there’s no food, when they find themselves in a part of the forest where the local people don’t like meditating monks and are actually trying to drive them away. There are stories of people putting broken glass out on the road where monks would go for their almsround: We don’t have that here, broken glass disguised in the dust.

There are people who have voodoo food, who put something in food that could either kill somebody or that could bring that person under their power. Sometimes they would test it on wandering monks, figuring that it didn’t really matter. He was a stranger, and if he was really good, he wouldn’t die—there was that attitude over there.

You also had the senior monks in Bangkok who were down on the forest tradition and made it hard for them to settle in some parts of the country.

So all in all, they had their problems, too, which we don’t see. You look in their biographies and autobiographies, and there’s a tendency not to talk about this kind of thing, partly because some of it to this day is still politically sensitive, partly because if you’re writing your autobiography and you’re talking about your difficulties, it seems unseemly.

For them, the whole point of their practice was not focusing on the difficulties but finding where their strength was to put up with the difficulties—so that they could make light of the difficulties, so that those things didn’t really bother them.

I found in my own practice that this was an important principle. People have asked me sometimes, “What was the most difficult thing about being in Thailand

all those years?” I can’t think of it. And the reason I can’t think of it is because, at the time, I wasn’t focusing on it. It’s not that there weren’t difficulties, but I kept trying to find where I could find some strength inside myself, what was of value inside myself, what was supportive in the environment—even though there were some things that seemed to go against the practice. Even in the meditation monasteries you find some people coming who try to get in the way of your practice—all kinds of things, but you don’t focus on them. You focus on where your strengths are, you focus on where the support is, and try to make the most of that. When you do that, you find you have a lot more stamina in the practice.

So it comes down to that simple principle: “Count your blessings”—the things that are good in your life.

Years back, I was reading an excerpt from the diary one woman made of her life on the frontier here in the States, basically giving instructions to her daughter on how to run a household. Just washing clothes was a huge production. She had to get the firewood, she had to start the fire, get the pot on the fire, get the water hot enough. They didn’t have ready-made soap powder, so they had to make do with what they could find in terms of cleaning agents. It all took a lot of elbow-grease to get those clothes clean.

At the end of her instructions she said, “Okay, when you’re finished, you’ve got the clothes all hung out on the line, take the water and pour it out on the flowers in front of the porch. Then sit on the porch and count your blessings.” That last step was an important part of the directions on how to wash the family’s clothes.

And it’s a good principle in the practice: Count your blessings. At the same time, recognize where you have problems, recognize that there are difficulties, recognizing that there are parts of the mind that are not one hundred percent with the practice. Sometimes we try to deny that, which doesn’t help. We’re not living in Pollyanna-land. Or we may not like the idea that there’s a part of us that doesn’t like to sit down and do the practice all the time. That kind of denial doesn’t help.

Be clear about where the difficulties are, but also be clear on where your advantages are, where your strengths are, where things *are* going well. The things you do have to rely on: They’re there. Learn how to draw strength from them. That’s half the battle right there, if not more.