

## *Pissing on Palaces*

*April 9, 2010*

A famous scholarly monk from Bangkok who was very skeptical about the Wilderness Tradition and about the possibility of getting anywhere in meditation once went to visit Ajaan Mun and asked him, “Here you are out in the forest, meditating all alone. Where do you go to listen to the Dhamma? I’m in Bangkok with famous Dhamma teachers all around and even then I come up with problems that I can’t solve and they can’t solve, either. So what hope do you have out here in the forest? Where can you listen to the Dhamma?” And Ajaan Mun’s response was, “I hear the Dhamma all the time, 24 hours a day, except when I’m asleep.” And the monk replied, “Well, that shows you know how to listen.”

And it’s true. The Dhamma’s always proclaiming itself wherever you look—if you look in the right way, listen in the right way, if you tune into the fact that there is Dhamma being taught. Actually, it’s not really taught, it’s just the way things are. They simply show the way they are by their behavior. As Ajaan Mun said, you see a leaf fall, and it teaches you the principle of inconstancy, impermanence. You hear a monkey call, and what you hear is its pain and suffering. It’s all around us.

When the Buddha referred to his teaching of the Dhamma and the Vinaya, he’d use different words for how he taught. The Vinaya was something he formulated. In other words, he had to put together the rules for there to be a Vinaya. But the Dhamma’s something already there, and so he said that the Dhamma was something he simply pointed out. All he had to do was point it out so that people could see.

So this is a skill we have to develop: the ability to hear the Dhamma all the time, to see the Dhamma all the time, so we don’t have to be dependent on somebody else to teach us the Dhamma, all the while wondering if the words are true or not. Of course, one of the problems is that we’re surrounded in the West by people with lots of anti-Dhamma attitudes, and that includes a lot of Dhamma teachers. But that’s the nature of human society in general. To tune into the Dhamma, you have to learn to tune out a lot of the messages that are being sent your way. And that requires a whole set of skills.

One is to make sure that your intention is skillful in what you do, say, and think. This is why we recite those passages on the brahma-viharas every evening. It’s not that we’re praying to some god to make these things happen, that everybody be happy. And it’s not that we believe that simply by wishing it, it’s going to be so. As the Buddha once said, if things could be made true simply by wishing and praying, there wouldn’t be any poor people, any sick people, any ill people in the world. Actually, the good things there are in the world are there because people have had good intentions and acted on those intentions.

So that’s what we’re doing as we develop goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity: We’re working on our intentions to make sure that they’re straight in line with the Dhamma. Just that much right there helps tune us in, because it focuses on the point that our actions are the important things in the world. What we’re doing right here, right now: That’s the most important thing—which is very different from the message that we get from everybody else. The news presented by the media is about what somebody else is doing someplace else: They tell us that that’s more important and that you’re just a loser sitting here watching TV or listening to the radio or on the web, absorbing what the real actors in the world are doing. Then you get sucked into the illusion that, “Well, maybe if I send out a message, I’ll become an important actor, too.”

But, actually, the really important things in your life are things that nobody else can know: what you’re doing in your mind. This is important because what you do in the mind then becomes the basis for what you say, what you do, what you think. So that’s one way to tune into the Dhamma.

When you see or hear anything that helps to support that, you know you’re seeing and listening to the

Dhamma. As for anything that pulls attention away from that, you know you're listening to something that's not Dhamma.

This is where you have to develop your equanimity, so you can detach yourself from anti-Dhamma ideas. You need compassion and goodwill so that your detachment doesn't become cold, indifferent, or hard-hearted. But you also need the detachment of equanimity so that you can step back a bit and not get sucked into the ways of the world. Because what do they have? They have gain and loss—and we've seen a lot of this recently: people doing things that they think are going to make them wealthy, to get ahead in life, and it turns out that they're just shooting themselves in the feet.

Then there are the things people do for status and praise but end up causing a lot of suffering for themselves and for the people around them. The things they claim to do for the sake of love and compassion place burdens on the people they say they love. To look realistically at the human condition requires a strong sense of irony. Everybody's motivated by the desire for happiness, and yet look at what we do. We create more misery than any other species on the planet—and we're supposed to be the smartest species. So we need to step back a bit.

One of the things I appreciated most about Ajaan Fuang, especially when I first met him, was how, even though he was a Thai person, he seemed to be standing outside of Thai society. He wasn't swept up with the usual Thai cares and concerns. And this is typical of the Wilderness Tradition in general. It has roots way back in the Buddhist tradition. It's one of the reasons we come out into the wilderness: to get a separate sense of perspective so that we're not spinning around with everybody else. We're standing outside of the spinning.

We have to keep reminding ourselves that the things people run after are not really all that real, all that worthwhile. In Sri Lanka there are the remains of ancient forest monasteries and most of the remains are really plain. They were just brick buildings and all they have now are the brick foundations. One detail, though, was really elaborate: the stone panels in the urinals. They had bas-relief pictures of palaces on the back panels of the urinals so that the monks could piss on palaces every day. I suppose I should say that they were pissing with compassion but no, probably not. They were expressing their disdain, which I think is emblematic of an attitude that's really healthy. You look at all the things that people run after—power, wealth, fame, or as Twigg once said, all the most horrible things in life. If that's what you're tuned into, you're not going to hear the Dhamma.

You've got to tune into other things. You have to tune into compassion, kindness—but not idiot compassion or idiot kindness. You have to train these qualities with discernment so that they don't provide cover for your defilements. This means that, primarily, you have to tune into heedfulness, the sense that your actions really are life-shaping and you've got to be careful how you act. You can't allow yourself to waste your time over things that are really no use at all. Because the question is, given that life is so short, what are you going to take with you?

When I was in New York last month, I gave a series of talks on not-self. In one of the talks I focused on the whole issue of rebirth and how rebirth was an important teaching on not-self. Everyone looked kind of puzzled, because most people think of the idea of rebirth as the ultimate form of selfing: not only do you have a self in this life, but it also extends into the next. But the connection between rebirth and not-self comes in the sutta where Ven. Ratthapala's talking to King Koravya. The king had asked him, "Why did you ordain? Your family's healthy, you're healthy, you haven't suffered any loss. What would inspire you to go forth?" And Ratthapala said, among other things, that "The world has nothing of its own; one has to pass on leaving everything behind." And the king said, "Well, how can you explain that? I've got lots of wealth and I can take it wherever I go." And Ratthapala replied, "Can you take it with you when you die?" And the king had to admit, "Well, no. When I die, I have to leave everything behind." That's how death teaches not-self.

But it also teaches you that there are some things that do carry over, that you do take with you. You take your kamma; you take the qualities of mind you've developed. So you need to make sure that you've got some good qualities to take with you. What we're living for as meditators is to develop the qualities—in some cases they're called the noble treasures—of conviction, virtue, a sense of shame and compunction over the idea of doing something harmful, the willingness to learn, generosity, and wisdom. These are qualities of mind you can take with you, and you don't want to scrounge around for them at the last minute. Death is like being suddenly

evacuated with no time to pack your bags. You find yourself swept to a new land, a new place, and all you have are your skill sets. So what skills sets have you been collecting?

Focus in on that, listen to that question, keep that question in mind because that's what enables you to hear the Dhamma in the other things you notice around you. You see other people and some of them are working on good skill sets, while others are working on who knows what: the skills of impatience, entitlement, overweening pride. When you look at them, you should ask yourself: "Is this something I want to take as a model for my behavior or is this something I have to learn from as a lesson in precisely what *not* to do?" When you do this, you're not passing judgment on the value of the person; you're looking at the person as a possible guide and deciding whether you want to take that person's actions as a guide to your own. It's not harsh and judgmental to look at people in this way. It's common sense.

And the Buddha never said that it was wrong to judge other people. I was reading a book recently that contained a supposed quote from the Pali Canon where the Buddha says that if you judge other people, you destroy yourself by the root. This statement was even addressed to Ven. Ananda, to give it an air of truthiness. But the whole passage was an interpolation. The Buddha never said that. He actually said that you have to learn how to judge people wisely in terms of the skill or lack of skill in their actions. You need to do this for the purpose of deciding whether you want to take them as an example or not.

When you see other people who, through their greed and heedlessness, have destroyed their wealth, destroyed their status, destroyed the company they work for, you can take it as a warning signal: That's a Dhamma lesson right there. When you see someone who's found peace of mind: There's a Dhamma lesson right there, too.

The important thing is to detach yourself from the usual snares of the world. They dangle things in front of your face and lead you on so that you can't really hear the message of the Dhamma. It's like the cartoon in *The New Yorker* that shows people trudging along on a city street, each with a big stick coming up their back and hanging down in front of them, dangling a carrot in front of their faces. They all look pretty glum. And on the street, there's a guy driving his top-down sports-carrot down the road, smiling to himself. We're all going after those dangling carrots and that's why we don't really see the Dhamma around us.

So learn how to step back and put a question mark around the messages you're getting from the people around you, from the media, from whatever the source. Say, "Okay, is that a Dhamma lesson about what to do or about what *not* to do? There's got to be a Dhamma lesson in here somewhere." It's like tuning your radio. There are always different radio waves or different frequencies going through the air right now, going through your body right now. If you tune in to one frequency, you get classical music. If you tune in to another frequency, you get Tijuana. If you tune in to another, you get hate radio. It's all there in the air. The question is, to which frequency are you going to tune in? If you tune in properly, you tune in to the Dhamma because it's always there, too.

But it requires the right attitude: your desire to be skillful, to search for happiness in a way that embodies goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy, along with the equanimity that allows you to step back and question any non-Dhamma stations, any non-Dhamma frequencies you encounter. When you learn to tune in your mind just right, you find that the Dhamma is broadcasting, as Ajaan Mun said, 24 hours a day. It's there to listen to, it's there to see whenever you want it—if you know how to listen, if you know how to look.