

## *The Real World Isn't for Real*

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Sometimes you hear the idea that the world outside of the monastery is the real world, and the world inside the monastery is somehow unreal. That the real struggles in life, the real challenges in life that are worth fighting for are outside. That somehow the struggles you engage in here in the monastery are not. This is an idea that's put forth usually by people outside the monastery.

Ajaan Lee has a good response to that. He says that when you look at the world, you see that its goodness isn't true; its truth isn't good. If you want something true and good, you look to the Dhamma. So it's not a question of real world versus unreal world. It's the world versus the Dhamma. The Dhamma is what's genuine.

When we talk about goodness, what makes life worth living? It's in the practice of the Dhamma. If you can find a place where everything is devoted to the practice and you're not distracted, then you've found something real. The world talks about goodness, talks about values, but as you run down the list of the different areas where you could earn a living, what are their real values? Politics? I was just reading the other day that one of the main candidates for president next time around used to be a lawyer in the torture chambers of Guantanamo. Now he's being rewarded. As for the people who reported what was going on in the torture chambers, they're in jail. You look in academia: People get ahead, not necessarily because their research is better, but because they know how to promote it. The same in business: It's not the case that the best products are the ones that get sold most. There are in's and out's and ways you can manipulate the market.

So as Ajaan Lee said, the goodness of the world isn't really true, and its truth isn't good. We chanted just now, "The world is swept away, it does not endure. You have nothing of your own." All the stuff that you could amass in the world can't stay with you. What does this world have to offer? Gain, loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, pain. Those things are not necessarily real. Gain can come from cheating. Status can come from cheating. Praise can come from anything. There are people who will praise horrible behavior and condemn good behavior. And pleasures often entail doing things that are going to cause long-term pain. Is that what you want?

Or do you want to look after the big issues inside? As you go out into "the real world," the real issues inside you don't get much space. You've been born and you

know you're going to get old if you live long enough. You're going to get sick and you're going to die for sure. And what does the world teach you about that? The education we get in schools, does that prepare us for that? Not at all. They're preparing us to be good workers and good consumers. When we can't work anymore, can't consume anymore, they throw us away. They call us "redundant people."

In the meantime, not only do they offer you nothing in terms of what you need to know for dealing with aging, illness, and death, they can also get you to do things that will make it really difficult when aging comes, when illness comes, when death comes. Often their attitude is that "There's nothing much you can do about those things, so buy our stuff." They encourage your greed, encourage your anger, encourage your delusion—all which are going to be really bad for you. Society is bad for your health—your mental health—and your real issues don't get addressed at all.

So here at the monastery you have an opportunity to address the real issues. You can sit down and be with your mind—and it's not easy. When you squeeze meditation into your life outside, you're lucky if you can meditate enough just to maintain your sanity, maintain a sense of balance. But with all the other things coming into your life, as with any multi-tasking, there are a lot of things that get sloughed over. If there are parts of the mind that you don't want to look at, well, you don't have to look at them. There are other things to fill your time.

But when you're here face-to-face with your body in the present moment, face-to-face with your mind in the present moment, things are going to come up. Parts of yourself that you don't like to see, you're going to have to look at them carefully if you want to get past them. And here's the opportunity to see them. When you look at the breath, you're very close to looking at the mind. When you look at the breath you give yourself a good foundation—a place to stand so that when you look into the mind and see things you don't like about the mind, you're not blown away. So try to develop a sense of ease, well-being, belonging here with the breath in the present moment.

We develop virtue, we develop generosity, good habits inside, good habits in our relationships with people around us, so that we have a sense of self-esteem, that we do have some self-worth. That way, when things come up in the mind that challenge our self-image, we're not devastated. We have the confidence that we have enough goodness to deal with them.

So the real issues are here as you're sitting face-to-face with the mind. As Ajaan Lee says, when you start practicing, that's when you see your defilements. You can read about the practice and have all kinds of theories about how things should go

in nice ordered steps, but you find that the mind goes up and down as you actually look at it. Things seem to be settling down and then greed comes in, lust comes in, anger comes in. Fear. Anxiety. Well, here's your chance to face them.

It's like those heroes in vision quests. They're running away, running away, running away from what they feel is chasing them. It's only when they turn around and face whatever it is that seems to be such a big danger in their lives that they can actually live without fear. They can overcome it.

Being outside and not practicing is running away. Practicing is taking a stance. So even though the world gets swept away, you don't get swept away. It offers you no shelter, but you're finding shelter for the mind. In fact, *shelter* is one of the words for nibbana.

You see all these things that are not your own, but there are still good goals that you *can* lay claim to, thinking, "This is what I really want to do. This is what I really want to accomplish." In other words, you take your sense of agency and you use it well to examine that last problem in the Dhamma summaries: *The world is insatiable, insufficient, and a slave to craving*. The world is never going to give you enough, so why do you keep running after it?

It's like eating potato chips. The more you eat, the more you want, but they never really satisfy you and they make you sick to boot. The Buddha offers genuine health food for the mind: conviction in the power of your actions. He encourages persistence, i.e., learning to take delight in developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones, whether it means just watching them or actually actively undoing the unskillful ones to replace them with something more skillful. The Buddha has you feed on mindfulness, concentration, discernment—finding joy in all these things.

When you can find joy in this path, you can look at the pleasures that the world has to offer, and you can see that they're dangerous, either because they make you complacent or because they sometimes require that you do underhanded things to gain them. So either you're creating bad karma or you're setting yourself up to create more bad karma in the future. And yet they say that they're real. They may be real but they're not really for real. If you want something that's for real, you look to the Dhamma, because it's not only real but also good.