

Shame & Acceptance

April 13, 2009

Ajaan Fuang would sometimes tell me the story of his childhood. He was born into a poor family and didn't have many relatives. Many of them had died in a plague years before. He was orphaned at the age of eleven and was sent off to live in a monastery as what they called a *dek wat*, one of those boys who just hang around the monastery, help fix rice for the monks, and run errands. He had a little bit of an education, not much. And as he got into his teens, he began to realize that his life didn't look all that promising. He didn't have any connections, didn't have much of an education. So he looked to the Dhamma. "This," he said, "is the only way my life is going to have any meaning, is going to go anywhere at all." As he said, "I must not have much merit, so I've got to make as much as I can."

That was his original impulse to practice the Dhamma, realizing that he didn't have much to come from, but what he *did* have was enough to practice the Dhamma. And this was his hope: that he could make something of himself through the practice.

This was a common theme with a lot of Ajaan Mun's students. They came from peasant families, often poor, mainly way up in the Northeast. The basic message of Thai society was that poor people didn't have anywhere to go. They were going to stay poor. At the same time, there was a lot of pride in Bangkok that if anybody was going to understand the Dhamma, it was the scholars in Bangkok, people who had the background and education that prepared them to read and think philosophical thoughts. Although it was possible for people to come from the countryside areas into Bangkok to learn, the scholars were considered to have a monopoly on the Dhamma.

So when Ajaan Mun was teaching, he found he had to deal with the assumption many poor people had that "I just don't have the merit to get anywhere in the practice." He kept reminding his students, "You have everything you need. You've got a human body. You've got a human mind. You've got breath. You've got your awareness. You've got some mindfulness, some alertness. These are all the things you need." And so a lot of his Dhamma talks focused on, one, the fact that people were suffering; and, two, they had the resources that, if they worked at them, could take them out of suffering. That's the important point: *if you work on them*. You need to have a strong sense that where you are is suffering, but you have what it takes to get beyond that suffering if you apply yourself.

This is what motivated Ajaan Fuang. This is why he was willing to put in long hours in the practice, put up with a lot of hardships, because that was the only way to make progress.

Here in the West the problem is a little bit different. Most people coming to Buddhism come from comfortable backgrounds with a good amount of education. But they still can have a sense of low self-esteem, which in their case comes more from psychological than from social issues. They don't like to be challenged, so they like to hear that the practice doesn't ask them to do anything:

just learn to accept themselves as they are; that's all you have to do, and that's what the Dhamma's all about. But that leaves them stuck where they are. The whole point of the Dhamma is that it takes you someplace where you haven't been. As the Buddha said, you come to realize the as yet unrealized, to attain the as yet unattained, to know the as yet unknown: to find a true end to suffering.

So there is a lot of work involved. It's not going to be hard all the time, but there are times when you really do have to go against what you'd like to do, or beyond the limits of your comfort zone. This willingness to push yourself beyond your comfort zone is what's going to make all the difference. But to do that, you need to realize that you have what it takes. Often we keep ourselves back or hold ourselves back because we have a very limited notion of what we're capable of. This is where low self-esteem or an unskillful sense of shame can be debilitating. But as with so many other things, there's a skillful sense of shame and an unskillful sense of shame. Unskillful shame is what keeps you where you are: the idea that "I can't get any better than I am; I'm pretty hopeless."

That kind of shame the Buddha never encouraged. What he did encourage is your willingness to look at what you've been doing to and see where it's been unskillful. When you do this, you are passing judgment. But you're passing judgment on your actions, not on yourself. Your intentions in the past may have been unskillful, or the actions may have been unskillful, but you're not stuck there. Just because you've had unskillful intentions doesn't mean that you're always going to have unskillful intentions. You can change your mind. You can change your habits.

The skillful or healthy sense of shame comes in here and says, "What I did in the past is nothing to be proud of, but I don't have to repeat that mistake." This is what your powers of judgment are good for. We tend to think of judgment as what a judge does in a courtroom, passing a final verdict on people, either setting them free or sending them off to jail. The Buddha, however, is not talking about final judgment of that sort. What he advises is more like a craftsman judging a work in progress: "How is it going? What can be changed? If it's not going well, what can I do to improve it?" That kind of judgment is healthy. It's necessary, because people with no sense of shame, no sense of judgment, are dangerous to themselves and to the people around them because they refuse to correct their mistakes.

So learn how to use your sense of shame in a skillful way, to use your sense of judgment in a skillful way, and be willing to push yourself beyond your comfort level to find resources that you haven't yet tapped. After all, we all have the potential for awakening. The qualities that the Buddha developed on the night of his awakening, or leading up to his awakening, are qualities that we all have in a potential form: mindfulness and alertness; heedfulness, ardency, and resolution. These things can be developed. If we think that we're here just to accept the way we are, we're not accepting the fact that we could develop these qualities.

Acceptance is something you have to learn to do in a skillful way. Accepting just where you are and thinking, "That's all I have to do; I'm perfectly fine as I am": That's unskillful acceptance. It dooms you to a miserable life. If, however, you accept where you are as a starting point, accepting that you also have these potential qualities for awakening, that's the skillful use of acceptance.

We're often taught mindfulness with the idea that it's simply noting what's already there and not doing anything about it: just learning how to be non-

reactive, which assumes that our reactivity is what's causing us to suffer. Sometimes we even hear that mindfulness is an activity totally devoid of any kind of ideological background, bias, or agenda. But the way this non-reactive sort of mindfulness is taught definitely has an agenda, an ideological understanding: that where you are right now is something you're stuck with, and you're not responsible for having shaped it; or if you are responsible, it's all in the past. The only suffering that can be cured is the suffering that comes from refusing to accept where you are and who you are. All you can do in the present moment is accept, accept, accept.

But that's not the understanding the Buddha encouraged when he taught mindfulness. As he said, part of what you're experiencing now comes from the past, but you're also making choices in the present, and these choices are actually shaping the way you experience the present. The way you label things, the way you think about things, all of the aggregates that go into your sense of the present moment have an element of present intention in them. And that element can be trained, can be changed. So when we're mindful and alert, we're not simply noticing what's already there as a total given. We also have to notice, "What are we doing right now to shape this experience, and how can that shaping activity be changed?" We have to remind ourselves, "What lessons have we learned that can help us shape experience in the most skillful way?" The different teachings on mindfulness give us a framework—either in terms of the body, or our feelings, mind-states, or mental qualities—as to what has to be accepted, what can be changed, and how to go about changing it skillfully.

So we're not submitting the present moment to a final judgment. We're judging it as a work in progress, because it leads to the next moment and then the next. With each moment, there's an element of intention, skillful or unskillful. You've got to keep figuring out and judging which is which. Once you see clearly which is which, the duties are pretty clearly laid out. If you're doing something unskillful, learn how to abandon it, to stop doing it. This requires understanding where it comes from so you can undercut it by undercutting the cause. If you're doing something skillful, learn how to maintain that activity, nurture it, allow it to grow. And again that requires understanding where it came from so you can keep fostering the skillful causes.

This means that what we're watching here as we meditate is a work in progress. And we're not just watching. We're participating in the work. The type of judgment we use here is the judgment, say, of a carpenter, working on a piece of furniture. As he planes or polishes the wood, he has to keep watching, "How is it going? Am I putting too much pressure, too little pressure? What needs to be redone? What has to be thrown out and started all over again? What can be salvaged?" That's a skillful use of judgment because the carpenter would be ashamed to put out a sloppy piece of workmanship. He's got his reputation, his self-esteem, to maintain.

So think of yourself as a craftsman. And learn to develop a skillful sense of shame, self-esteem, judgment, acceptance, and non-acceptance: learning with practice which things are skillful to accept, which things are not skillful to accept, so that you can develop mastery in what you're doing.