

Straightening Out the Heart

Venerable Ācariya Mahā Boowa's Dhamma Talk given on the 17th of March, 1986

Translated by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu

Once, when the Buddha was still alive, his opponents hired some people to curse him and Ven. Ānanda when they were out on their alms round. “You camels. You skinheads. You beggars,” – that’s what they say in the texts. Ven. Ānanda got all upset and asked the Buddha to go to another city – a city where they wouldn’t get cursed, a city where they wouldn’t get criticised. The Buddha asked him, “And what should we do, Ānanda, if they curse us there?”

“Leave that city and go to another.”

“And if they curse us there, where are you going to go? If you keep running away from wherever they curse you, in the end you won’t have a world left to live in.”

“This is why it is not right to run away from your enemies by escaping from one place and going to another. The only right way to escape is to be aware in your heart and escape into your heart. If you’re sharp enough to contend with the enemies in your heart, your outside enemies won’t mean a thing. You can live where you like and go where you like with no trouble at all.”

That’s what the Buddha said, after which he added – he said it in *Pāli*, but I’ll give you just the gist – “We’re like elephants going into battle.” (In those days they used elephants in battle, you know, they didn’t wage war the way we do now.) “We’re like elephants going into battle. We don’t pay any heed to the arrows coming at us from all sides. We’re intent only on going into the front lines and crushing the enemy to bits with our own strength and ability. We can’t be shaken by the dangers coming from this place or that.”

The same sort of thing holds true for us. We’re students of the Buddha. If we run here because there are enemies over there, and then run there because of enemies over here, always on the run in this way from day to dusk to the day we die ... If we’re like this, then we’re like a mangy dog. It itches here, so it scratches itself and then runs over there, hoping to get away from the itch. Once it gets there, it still itches, so it scratches some more and runs on. It’ll never come to the end of this, because the itch lies in its own skin. But if it gets over its mange, it won’t itch and won’t scratch, and can be comfortable wherever it goes.

As for us, we've got the kind of mange that makes us itch and scratch in our own hearts, so we have to cure it right here in our hearts. When people criticise us, what do they say? Take their words to contemplate so that you can get to the facts. Usually, we just react to our first assumptions about their criticisms. What are those assumptions? Suppose they say that Old Grandfather Boowa is a skinhead. Am I really a skinhead? I have to take a good look at myself. If I really am a skinhead, I have to admit that they're right, that what they say is true. Once you take the approach of accepting what's right, what's true, then there are no more issues.

This is how you straighten out your life – by straightening out your heart. If they say good things about you, how does your mind zip out to react? If they say bad things, how does it react? As soon as they've said those things, the breath with which they said them is past and gone. They say good things, and that breath is gone. They say bad things, and that breath is gone – but the breath of the thoughts that get formed in our mind, that doesn't go. Our attachments and assumptions will hold it right here and then burn us right here with all the smouldering thoughts we keep stirring up.

So we end up saying that this person is no good, that person is no good – but as for the way we burn and get ourselves all upset, we don't give any thought to whether that's any good nor not. This is the point we usually don't straighten out, which is why we go criticising this and that and get things all worked up. But if you do straighten out this point, then you can live wherever you like. Your outside manner in dealing with people may be heavy or light, as the case may call for, but within yourself you're not stuck on either *yourself*, *the issues that get sent your way*, or *the other person*, *the breath with which that person says things* – not stuck on anything at all. Only then can you say that you're practising the Dhamma. This is how you straighten things out when you straighten out your life.

If you try to go straightening things out outside – straightening out this person and that, running away from this one and that – where are you going to run to? If you run away from this person, you run into that one. Run away from that person, and you run into this one. If there's no one left to run away from, you end up running into yourself, because you're a person, too. This is how you have to think when you practice the Dhamma – you have to encompass everything.

The Buddha didn't teach people to be stupid, you know – running from this city to that, in the way Ven. Ānanda asked him to go to some

other city where they wouldn't get cursed. The Buddha refused to go. "Wherever we go, people have the same sort of mouths, so they can curse you in just the same way." That's how you have to think if you really want to look after your life.

