

Motivation

April 30, 2016

For the past couple of months, I've been out teaching in different places—in particular, going back to the East Coast and then down to Brazil. In both places I was asked a question that brought to mind a comment that Ajaan Fuang made many years back. One evening during the first year when I was staying with him, he said, “You know, there are people who say that the path is all about letting go, but that's not right. There's the part you have to develop, the part you have to work at, to bring into being.”

At the time it seemed very commonsensical and very obvious. But the issue keeps coming up.

When I was back East, one of the questions was, “Well, if you're letting go of everything, how can you live in this world?” This comes from the misunderstanding that it's all about letting go and nothing about developing.

It was put in even stronger terms down in Brazil. Someone said, “The basic Buddhist attitude is complacency, and how is that supposed to help the world—if you're just being indifferent, letting go of everything?”

That really struck me. Because after all, the Buddha said everything skillful comes from heedfulness, which is the opposite of complacency. And yet look at the image that Buddhism has acquired: we're just letting go, letting go, okay with everything as it is.

Ajaan Fuang once told me about a nun who was practicing with him and he had her contemplating her body. He told her that any part of the body that appears, just imagine that you're burning it up. She'd see her stomach, and so she'd burn it up. Then she saw her lungs, and she burned those up. And as she was burning up the different parts of the body, she had this vision off to the side that a lot of other parts were just kind of piling up, waiting to be burned. She was saying it was like having lots of fish to grill, and she just had so many fish stacking up all the time.

She told him she was getting kind of disenchanted with the whole thing, tired of the whole thing. He said, “Okay, we do practice for the sake of disenchantment, we do what we're doing for the sake of disenchantment. But we shouldn't get disenchanted with the doing.”

The path is something you actually have to have some passion for. Because after all, it is something you fabricate, something you put together. Mindfulness you put together. Concentration is put together. All the factors of the path are

things that you fabricate. And to fabricate something, you've got to have desire. There has to be a passion.

So you have to learn how to give rise to that desire: That's part of right effort. There has to be a passion for the Dhamma, the desire to do this well, to stick with it all the way through. So as you're practicing, if you find that often your motivation begins to lag, you've got to learn how to motivate yourself and generate some more desire.

In some cases, it's through comforting yourself with the thought that this is a good path followed by lots of good people in the past. In other words, you use your compassion, your own desire for happiness to remind yourself, "This is why I'm here, because I want a happiness that's better than what I've had in the past, something more reliable. And this is the way to do it."

And you can further remind yourself that if you ever do attain any of the noble attainments, the people who give things to you to help you with the practice will get a lot of merit. So you're doing it for them too.

Sometimes the Buddha has you think back on your past virtue, your past generosity as a way of giving yourself a sense of self-confidence that, Yes, you can do this. The good things you've done in the past are a sign that you've got some of the perfections and some of the merit that's needed, some of the good qualities of mind are needed for the practice.

After all, when you practice the precepts, you're developing mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. And you're learning how to bring some wisdom to all these qualities, learning how to be mindful of the right things, alert to what you're doing in the right way. And have a real desire to do it well.

That's another one of the ways of motivating yourself: to remind yourself that you're trying to work on a skill, and there's a certain pride that comes with developing the skill. So when you meet up with difficulties, you don't take them as reasons to let yourself be defeated. Because after all, your defilements will be really happy to say, "See? You can't do this. You're incompetent. You can't handle this. This is too much." That's your laziness talking.

So you've got to think back on the goodness you've got, that, Yes, you can do this, you've got the potential. And you've been learning these skills through your generosity, through your virtue. So you're not totally at a loss. It's simply learning how to take what you've got and bring it to a higher level. Try to take some pride in your craftsmanship here.

The flip side of that, of course, is a sense of shame when you're not doing it well. This is when you get a little harsh on yourself, saying, "If I don't practice, wouldn't I be ashamed of myself? I had this opportunity to practice and I threw it

away. I spent my time in thinking all kinds of useless thoughts.”

The shame the Buddha recommends is meant to be a healthy shame: not the kind of debilitating shame that says that you’re worthless as a person, but simply the shame that comes from being, say, in the Buddha’s case, a noble warrior. You’ve got some skills; you’ve got some value to you. Why stoop to lower behavior?

This is the shame that comes with self-esteem, a self-esteem grounded in what you’re actually capable of doing. You have the right attitude toward being always willing to learn. Remind yourself that the best self you can have as a meditator is the self that’s always willing to learn rather than the self that always wants to be good already.

That second kind of self is murder on the path. Because part of the mind will try to dress up little bits of insight and little bits of concentration into something more than they really are. Another part of the mind will know that this is self-deceit, and there will be a war going on inside as you get pulled back and forth between unrealistic estimations of what you can do and a sense that it’s all just a show, that it’s all just fake.

So neither side is useful. Those kinds of selves are selves at war. But the self that’s always willing to learn from mistakes is a different kind of self. That kind of self is the attitude that can see you through all kinds of problems and get you out the other side.

And all this, of course, is based on heedfulness: the realization that your actions do make a difference. Your thoughts, words, and deeds make a huge difference in your life. And if you don’t work on the skills, there’s going to be a lot of suffering. If you *do* work on the skills, you can avoid the suffering.

Heedfulness means you have a choice. It’s not just a matter seeing dangers and getting all upset and scared. It’s the heedfulness that allows you to develop skill because you know there’s a way to avoid the dangers.

And it lies in watching the next breath, and then the next breath. This is another good way to motivate yourself. This is a big job we’re attacking here. And sometimes it’s very easy to get intimidated by the size of the job. But you can remind yourself: Every job has lots of steps. The big jobs have more steps. You focus on the next step, and then the next step, and then the next step. And you content yourself with the fact “I’ve got to do this step well.”

This doesn’t mean that you lower your sights, it simply means that you raise your standards for what you’re doing right now in the sense of, “Whatever the step is, I want to do it well.” Don’t overlook the little steps like staying with the breath or bringing the mind right back if you see it wandering off a little bit, or

whatever the little job may be right now. Focus on doing the little jobs well and they add up to larger skills.

All of this comes under the application of wisdom to your right effort: knowing how to psych yourself out, knowing the tricks of your defilements, and learning how to parry them, how to counteract them.

We tend to have a very exalted idea of what Buddhist wisdom is. Well, it starts with these little things: learning how to see the tricks of a particular defilement and not give in; learning how to motivate yourself to do what is in your best interest but may not necessarily be what you'd like to do; and knowing how to talk yourself out of doing things that you like to do but you know in the long-term are going to cause harm.

This is pragmatic. Strategic. This is what wisdom and discernment are all about. They're not about arriving at great realizations about the world or whatever. Because wisdom is meant to go further than just a realization, it's meant to take you to another dimension. It's a means to an end.

It starts out with little means to what seem to be smaller ends, but they all add up, they all connect with that larger end. So when you're learning how to outwit your own clever defilements, remind yourself that that's an important accomplishment right there.

Take each step as it comes—and you'll find that some steps don't come in the way you imagined them, or in the order you imagined them. But if this is the problem you're facing right now, well, this is the problem you've got to deal with.

Remember that attitude: You're willing to learn whatever lesson needs to be learned. Sometimes they're small lessons to begin with. Or lessons you thought you should have learned a long time ago but apparently they weren't learned. Well, go back and look at them again.

It's in this way that your discernment gets exercised and, through exercise, it gets more subtle and goes deeper, and eventually is able to accomplish a lot more.

So to get to that point where you let go of everything it requires first that you develop some things: all the factors of the path. That way, the work that needs to be done gets done. And you have a passion for doing this well.

This makes the difference between what Ajaan Lee calls letting go like a rich person and letting go like a pauper. A pauper has nothing, so, "Well, I'll just let go and just content with being a pauper." That's no good.

You work at your inner wealth and then, when you let it go, as he says, it doesn't leave you. You don't have to hang onto it anymore. But it's there. It's so solidly there that you don't have to hang on.

So it's not that inner wealth is bad or that we should run away from it. We

have to work at it, we have to develop it and hold onto it until it gets to the point where it's strong enough that we don't have to hold on anymore.

And then it will take care of us.

That's what makes it special.