

Chanting on Your Own

May 31, 2021

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, before he sent me up the mountain to meditate, he gave me a book. The book had two pieces by Ajaan Lee: One was “Method 2,” and the other was *The Divine Mantra*. In the beginning, of course, I paid most attention to “Method 2.” It wasn’t long, though, before he asked me to memorize *The Divine Mantra*. He said it would help with my meditation. As you know, it’s a chant on the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, relating them to the six properties, the six *dhātu*.

I found that it really did help with the meditation. Thinking in terms of those properties was not part of my upbringing here in the West. It was one of the aspects of meditation instruction that was most foreign to my background. But I did as I was told and chanted it every day. I remember one night in particular as I was chanting and I got to consciousness, something inside me clicked and said, “This is referring to my awareness right here, right now,” and I saw that it spoke to my direct experience.

That’s one way in which chanting can be useful in the meditation: You repeat something long enough, you get to know it, and you begin to realize where it connects with your experience.

Now in general, meditation is helped by chanting simply because if you’ve been going through the day picking up different issues, different concerns, and the time comes to meditate, it’s good to have something to empty those issues and concerns out of the mind, to give you a different perspective, to think about the Buddha—the fact that we have a Buddha, we live in a world where there has been a Buddha. He left his teachings behind, the teachings are still with us, and the message they give is always the same—it’s a timeless message. So, as you’re repeating the chants, it’s good to think about the message, because that pulls you out of the issues of time and gets you into something timeless.

Now, specific chants are supposed to have different associations. The blessing chants: The Mangala Sutta is basically general auspiciousness; with the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta, you’re spreading goodwill all around, and, especially with the Khandha Paritta, goodwill for snakes and other creepy things.

There’s a story in the Canon. A monk was bitten by a snake and died. The monks reported this to the Buddha, and he said, “Well, it’s obvious he hadn’t spread goodwill to the four great families of snakes.” Then he taught the monks the Khandha Paritta.

The power of the chant lies in the goodwill that goes along with it. This is what sets the Buddhist attitude toward chanting apart from other attitudes that were current in India. In India, in other teachings, it was often thought that the words themselves had power—the syllables had power—but from the Buddha’s point of view, the power is in the intention behind the chant. In that case it’s goodwill, and goodwill expresses itself in different ways—in this case, a wish for safety.

One of the chants, the Ratana Sutta, has a story to go with it in the commentary: There was a plague in Vesālī, and the Buddha had Ven. Ananda go around the city chanting this sutta as a way of driving the plague out. But again, the power of the chant came from the goodwill for the citizens of Vesālī.

And you notice, in the blessing chants, there are other chants that are supposed to protect from fire, protect from illness. But here again it’s the quality of the goodwill as you chant: That’s what gets transmitted.

Of course, chanting is good not only for you or for the people around you. Devas like hearing the chants, too, and not just devas in Buddhist countries. I know one Thai monk who came here to the States. One of his followers took him around the country and they got to the American Southwest. He was meditating, and spirits of Native American children came to him, so he chanted the Dhammacakka and the Mahasamaya for them. He said they really liked it, as both those suttas mention a lot of devas, and they like to be remembered. So as you go out into the wilderness, those are two good chants to have as a friendly neighbor policy. I’ve noticed that chanting them creates a really good atmosphere.

I’ve had some strange experiences with them. There was one time we were building the chedi at Wat Dhammasathit, and we had a wooden building slapped together which functioned as a kitchen and the place where the monks would have their meals as they were working on the project. One afternoon, Ajaan Fuang was sitting there talking with some lay people. One of his students had gone into the chedi. We had a painting hung on the wall, something I had done. The plan was to have a sculpture of a naga in the middle of the chedi, and before the sculpture came, Ajaan Fuang asked me to do a little painting of a naga, and we hung it on the wall. The person came running back and said there was a huge snake behind the painting. The body was about the size of your wrist. And it was a gorgeous snake, a green-gold color. And as the person came running to see Ajaan Fuang in the little wooden building he glanced up, and there in the rafters of the building was another snake identical to the first one, curled around the rafters.

Ajaan Fuang sent the man down to find me—I was at the bottom of the hill—and ask me to come up and chant the Mahasamaya for the two snakes. I must admit it felt kind of strange, but as soon as I finished the chant, both snakes

uncoiled themselves from where they were and went back into the forest. So I figured that that was my gift to them.

So it's good that you make chanting a part of your practice. It creates a good atmosphere around the monastery; it creates a good atmosphere for you, as you keep imbuing your mind with the words of the Buddha.

It's so easy to get earworms. Old songs, old jingles get into your head and they don't want to leave. Well, one way to get them to leave is to get some chants as earworms: the chant of the 32 parts of the body, both in English and in Pāli; the five reflections; and the chants for spreading goodwill.

One of the most famous stories about a chant in the Forest Tradition is the chant that Ajaan Mun taught to Ajaan Khao. Ajaan Khao had ordained basically out of anger. He had been married, had gone off to do some buying and selling, came back, and found his wife with another man. His first instinct was to kill them, but then he realized, "That wouldn't help anything at all," so he left and ordained. Ajaan Mun saw that he had a big issue with anger, and so he taught Ajaan Khao a very long version of the metta chant, where you spread goodwill to the beings in the ten directions—the four cardinal directions, the four median directions (southwest, southeast, northwest, northeast), above, and below. And not just for all beings—the chant details ten categories of beings: human beings, common animals, devas, noble ones, non-noble ones, men, women, hungry ghosts; I've forgotten the whole list. It takes a good half hour to 45 minutes to do the whole chant. And that was the chant that calmed Ajaan Khao's mind down.

So the combination of thoughts of goodwill and the fact that you're expressing them, the words vibrating through your body, can have a calming effect and create a good atmosphere in which you can practice. In some monasteries in Thailand they chant for several hours every night. We don't do that here. I personally find that long group chanting is pretty oppressive because everybody has to chant whatever's been decided for them. When you're chanting on your own, you're free to chant whatever you want, and as you get to know the different chants, you'll find that some of them have different flavors and a different effect on the mind. So it's good to have a range of chants that you've memorized.

After all, the Buddha had the monks memorize lots and lots and lots of his teachings when he was alive, but you can find the chants that you respond most to, either in terms of the sound or the meaning or both, and develop a repertoire.

That way, when you're off meditating alone, it's as if you're not alone. You've got the Buddha there with you, and you're sending out a friendly energy in all directions so that the devas and the nagas and all the other invisible beings will find your presence pleasant and they'll be happy that you're here. So, for your sake

and theirs, try to develop a range of chants. Make your own chanting session part of the day, every day.