

Infinite Good Humor

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When teaching concentration, the forest ajaans rarely go into detail about a particular technique. Instead, they talk about developing a particular attitude, one of *samvega*: looking around and seeing that all the things that you might want to think about are not really worth thinking about, looking at the mind's own tendency to go after those things, and realizing that you don't want to go there. You don't want to follow it along. That's when the mind can begin to settle down and be still.

Ajaan Lee talks about this in his book on *satipatthana*, when he lists the various topics for getting the mind into concentration. In each case, he says that you want the topic to give rise to a sense of samvega. Contemplate the body, contemplate the elements, until you gain a sense of samvega about them. Then the mind can really settle down.

That chant we had just now, Ven. Ratthapala's reasons for ordaining, are probably the best analysis of what samvega means. It connects a lot of things in the teachings.

He's talking to a king who had asked him, "Why did you ordain?"

And Ratthapala gives these four Dhamma summaries. The first one is:

The world is swept away; it does not endure.

The king says, "What do you mean?"

Ratthapala illustrates this principle with some questions about aging. He asks the king, "When you were young, were you strong?"

The king says, "Yes. Sometimes I thought I had the strength of two people."

"And how about now?"

"Well, now, I'm 80 years old and sometimes I mean to put my foot in one place and it goes someplace else."

There you have the principles of inconstancy and aging.

The world offers no shelter; there is no one in charge.

Ratthapala illustrates this one with illness. It's a teaching on *dukkha*: He asks the king, "When you're sick, even though you're a king, can you order the people in your court to share out the pain of

your illness so that you will experience less? Or do you have to bear it alone?”

“I have to bear it alone. There’s no protection from things like that.”

The world has nothing of its own.

Here the king argues, “What do you mean? I have all these stores of wealth. How can you say that the world has nothing of its own?”

Ratthapala asks him, “When you die, can you take that wealth with you?”

“No, of course not.”

So there you have it: not-self and death.

In this way, aging, illness, and death map onto inconstancy, stress, and not-self.

Then there’s the fourth principle:

The world is insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving.

The mind never has enough. Even though it has to put up with all this aging, illness, and death, it keeps going, going, going for more.

To illustrate this point, Ratthapala asks the king, “Here you are, already wealthy, 80 years old – if someone told you that there was a kingdom to the east that you could conquer, would you try to conquer it?”

“Of course,” the king says.

“How about one to the south?”

“Sure, I’d go for that one too.”

“To the west?”

“Yeah, I’d go for that one.”

“How about the north?”

“I’d go for that one as well.”

“How about the other side of the ocean?”

“I’d go for that, too.”

This is where the real terror comes in. That’s what samvega means, literally. It’s a sense of terror. The mind has this tendency to keep going for things that are sure to involve more aging, illness, and death, more inconstancy, stress, and not-self. It seems never to learn. *That’s scary.*

When you realize that you’re trapped in this situation, you want a way out. If you just stay with that sense of being trapped, it’s too much for the mind to deal with. If you try to deny it and go back to

your old ways, there's always a lingering sense of unfinished business, that you're still unprotected.

So the proper response is *pasada*, a sense of confidence that there's a way out. This the texts don't explain in much detail. But one of the qualities you need, in terms of confidence, is what you might call infinite good humor.

In the course of the practice there are going to be a lot of setbacks. You think things are going well, and then something comes out of left field to wipe out what you've done. You need enough good humor to be able to get up, dust yourself off, and keep on going. If one thing doesn't work, you try something else.

You see this in the Buddha's own life. He tried various things, he developed very strong concentration under his first two teachers, and yet after all the work put into their instructions he realized that that was still not what he wanted, still not good enough. He left his first teacher and went to another, learned a higher level of concentration, but *that* wasn't good enough. Then he took the route of self-affliction: six years of tormenting himself in various ways, going into a trance by holding his breath, denying himself food to the point where he'd faint when he'd go to the bathroom, he was so thin and weak.

A person in that situation could do any number of things. Think about it. What kind of attitude keeps a person going like that? For one, there's pride. As the Buddha himself said, he looked around and couldn't see anybody who had undergone as much self-afflicted torture as he did. But where did it get him? It certainly didn't get him what he wanted. So he abandoned his pride and tried looking for another way. He thought of the time when he was a child and had spontaneously entered the first jhana—which, apparently, the training under the other two teachers had bypassed. He asked himself, "Why am I afraid of that pleasure?"

He'd been denying himself every form of pleasure. Like many people who've been indulging very heavily in sensual pleasures and then regret it, the Buddha took the immediate opposite tack and denied himself, starved himself, out of a fear of pleasure.

But now he asked himself, "Why am I afraid of this form of pleasure? There's no blame to it. It doesn't harm others or obscure the mind. It's a clear-minded pleasure." Realizing that there was no

blame to it, he wondered: “Perhaps this is the path.” But to follow that path, he’d have to eat more. Yet when he went back to eating again, the five brethren—who were looking after him and hoping that if he gained a self-awakening through self-torture, they’d be the first to learn about awakening from him—gave up on him. That could have been a really huge blow to his pride, but he didn’t let it get him down.

You could say he had patience and persistence, but how do you keep patience going? How do you keep persistence going? By having a good sense of humor about what’s happening to you in the path and having an *infinite* good humor that can keep you going. This is the attitude that allows you to say, “Whoops, another mistake! – Well, try again! Another mistake? Try again!” It’s that ability to step back from yourself a bit to see what you’re doing and not to be so *into* a particular state of mind or *into* a particular identity that you can’t let it go.

Humor means basically learning how to step back and see things from a larger perspective. That’s also a lot of what wisdom is, a lot of what discernment is: stepping back from your likes, saying, “Okay, this thing that I like to do, is it really good? Does it really lead to the result that I want?”

“Well, no.”

“Okay, then I have to learn how to not keep doing it.”

Or, “This thing that I don’t like doing, if I see that it leads to good results, why don’t I want to do it?”

You learn how to talk yourself into doing it.

But you can’t do that unless you learn how to not identify with your likes or dislikes: the things we tend to identify with more than anything else.

Good humor is the quality that allows you to disidentify, to step back from your likes and dislikes, the stories you tell yourself about all the energy you put into something and all the work you put into something, you’re going to run out of energy, you’re going to die—you can step back and say, “Is that really true?”

“Well, no.”

If you can learn to laugh that off, then you can pick yourself up and keep going.

Sometimes there are setbacks. You tried launching yourself on

something and now you realize you weren't really ready, so, okay, you go back to create a stronger foundation, and then you start all over again.

The quality of humor is something you see a lot of among the Thai ajaans. They don't talk about it that much, but they certainly exemplify it. This is why, when you look at their teachings, you can't just look at what's in the books. You have to look at *them*. One of the things that attracted me to Ajaan Fuang, for instance was his sense of humor. And he'd talk about Ajaan Mun's sense of humor. You don't read about that in the books, but he had some good examples.

So try to take an attitude of good humor toward your mistakes, good humor toward your setbacks, so that they don't defeat you. Maintaining that sense of good humor is what allows confidence to grow. You see that you *can* deal with difficulties or setbacks. You can develop that quality of very basic wisdom that the Buddha identified as wisdom or discernment in effort, or as we would say, in action.

We tend to think of wisdom or discernment as dealing with the three characteristics or emptiness or dependent co-arising: very high-level teachings. But as the Buddha pointed out, it begins with this ability to talk yourself into doing things that you don't like doing but you know are going to give good results, and the ability to talk yourself out of doing things that you like doing that you know are going to give bad results. It's *pragmatic*; it's *strategic*. And how to do people best strategize? The first step is to back away from the situation, to step back a bit from your emotional involvement and identification, and look with new eyes. See the irony in what you've been doing.

After talking to the king, Ratthapala later composed a poem, or at least there is a poem attributed to him, where he expresses amazement: *Here is someone about to die and he wants to conquer the world!* Ratthapala sees the irony in it. Now, irony here doesn't mean taking an ironic attitude toward the truth. In other words, you don't say that there really is no truth out there, or that it's all truth in quotes—truthiness—which is what irony has come to mean today. The Buddha's sense of irony, the arahant's sense of irony, is simply seeing that the world is so dumb: The things that people want most are the very things that make them suffer most. For a long time, before their awakening, the arahants had been doing that sort of

thing as well. This is why when they laugh at this tendency, it's not a harsh laugh. They know what it's like; they've been there themselves. But they were able to step back and see the foolishness. And in seeing the foolishness, that's when you let go.

In the contemplation that Ratthapala recommends, the elements of samvega map onto the three characteristics, inconstancy, stress, not-self. But there are other times when the insights that allow you to let go don't explicitly get expressed in those terms. You just see the foolishness in something you've been doing and you realize you don't have to do it. It's not just a matter of being foolish and dumb, but it's being foolish and *harmful* as well. When you can see that and see *through* that, you understand, "Oh, I've been *so* dumb." This is why people who have gained the noble attainments don't brag about them, because a lot of the attainment involves seeing their own stupidity. And being willing and *able* to laugh at it and let it go.

This is how a sense of infinite good humor can see you all the way through.