

Making the Dhamma Your Own

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A recurrent theme in the teachings of the forest ajaans is that you have to make the Dhamma your own. In other words, you can read about, you can hear about it, think about it, but if that's as far as you go, that's still the Buddha's Dhamma— somebody else's Dhamma. You can practice it a little bit, but unless you really push yourself, you don't really know how true that Dhamma is, and it's not really your own.

This is one of the reasons why the ajaans recommend going out into the forest, changing your environment, to test yourself. Because there are times when the meditation is going well; the mind seems to be perfectly okay, but you don't really know. Is it because your surroundings are okay, or do you really have the inner strength that the meditation is supposed to give? So you test yourself by going someplace else. For lay people, it means coming here to the monastery. For the monks, it means going out, finding another place, to see—when you're alone, without your ordinary surroundings—what's the state of the mind? And what can you do to strengthen that state of the mind? What are the qualities you're lacking? Your ability to step back and watch yourself is really important here, so that you don't get sucked into unskillful mind states and carried away by them.

The problem is that a lot of those unskillful mind states are not just mind states. You feel them in the body as well: the sense of irritation; the sense of dis-ease. And because they're in the body, you're going to be in that mind state too – that's the normal way of thinking. So it's important that you learn how to step back and just watch, as if from outside. The breath gives you a good place to do that. This is when you begin to appreciate the usefulness of the breath and the reliability of the breath. It's always your home. You can always work with it, no matter what.

Even when you're sick, you can work with the breath in a way that can turn a heavy pain into a lighter pain, or at least put you in a place where the pain doesn't have to really stab at the mind. And "pain" here can be either physical or emotional. You've got the breath here. Wherever you go, there's the breath. And you can use that as a reminder for all the good qualities you've heard about, that you've been developing in the meditation, that go along with the breathing: the mindfulness, alertness, persistence, endurance, ardency. Push yourself so that you can see that these things really do provide a good foundation for the mind. And when you've seen it for yourself, when you've seen it in your own mind, then that Dhamma becomes yours. It's not just the Buddha's Dhamma, or somebody else's Dhamma. It's your Dhamma. You have the power of conviction to get you through a difficult situation; the power of endurance, when you find that you can do things you didn't think you could do. That gives you a lot more

confidence. And we need to test these things, because we face a lot of issues in life that we don't like to think about and many of us don't prepare for, but we do have to prepare. Otherwise we'll suffer in a way that's not necessary, and that serves no purpose at all.

Aging comes, and you find that certain of your body functions no longer work. There's a great passage in the Canon where a king says that when he was young he thought he had the strength of two men, but now that he's 80, he thinks of putting his foot somewhere, and it won't even go there. It goes someplace else. The body gets less and less good at repairing itself, so actions that used to not take too much out of you, that you used to be able to recover from quickly, you find take longer and longer to recover from. After a while, it seems like the body's not recovering at all. Then different parts just stop working. And some of that stopping is life-threatening. All of a sudden you realize, you're alone. Sometimes doctors can help, but sometimes they can't. At that point, if you've developed qualities in the mind that you're confident in—and that you've tested and learned to trust because you've tested them—then aging, illness and death don't threaten you that much. But if you haven't tested these qualities, then you really don't know.

So an important principle in the practice is that when things get good, you try to test them—push the envelope, extend yourself further. If you get comfortable sitting for an hour, try an hour and a half. Try sitting up late into the night. When you're doing walking meditation, do a little bit more than you've done before. Go someplace you've never been before, someplace a little scary, and see what you have inside to fall back on. When you've learned that you really do have something to fall back on, that gives you a lot more confidence in yourself and in the qualities of the Dhamma—these qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha that we're trying to internalize. You know them for sure only because you've tested them.

I've noticed a lot of people who get interested in the Pali Canon, but if they don't really practice, they just practice in their ease and comfort, their interest begins to wane. They start getting cynical about the whole thing. But the people who've tested the teachings are the ones who maintain their confidence, maintain their conviction that what the Buddha taught is really true. That's because they've seen these qualities arise within them. They've seen that they actually can develop these qualities in ways that they wouldn't have expected. This is when the Dhamma really hits home: when you find to your surprise that you have more strength than you thought you had; more resilience, more endurance. You're faced with a difficult situation, and you find you can use your ingenuity to get beyond it. This strengthens your confidence both in yourself and in the Dhamma—because they become one and the same thing. Your mind becomes Dhamma; you've made it your own. And that's not by imposing your ideas about the Dhamma on it. It simply means that you make yourself into Dhamma by challenging yourself and using the Dhamma to rise to the challenge. When you've done that,

then the voices inside that say, “I can’t do this,” or “it’s too much to ask”: You find you don’t have to listen to them.

So it’s good to stretch yourself—stretch yourself to fit the Dhamma, and that way you make the Dhamma your own.

And once it’s really your own—there’s a nice passage in the Canon where someone says that even if the whole world rose up against the Buddha, he’d still side with the Buddha, from what he’d seen in his own practice. As the Dhamma gets bigger in your heart, the world gets smaller, becomes less and less of an issue, because you realize that the issues outside are nothing compared to the issues inside, and when you start straightening out these inside issues, the battle is won.