

A Sense of Yourself

July 6, 2014

An important part of meditation practice is making vows. Each time you sit down to meditate, you should have a purpose, something you want to do.

Focus your vow on what you're going to do more than on the results you're hoping to get. Don't make a vow that you're going to hit this jhana or that attainment. Make a vow you're going to stay with the breath or with whatever your topic's going to be for the whole hour.

The fact that you've made a vow means that you've made a promise to yourself. You want to stick to that promise. And in seeing the parts of the mind that don't want to stick to the promise, that's where you gain a lot of insight. But you don't want to give in to them. In fact, if you give in to them, then the chance for insight is gone.

It's like finding out about the hidden currents in the bottom of a river. When you build a dam, that's when you really know the currents are there. In the same way, you set up a few walls, you set up a few barriers in your practice. You're not going to go here, you're not going to go there. You're going to stay right on your path. You're not going to wander off to the fields on the right or the left. That's when you see the currents of the mind that otherwise remain hidden.

So you make that vow and try to stick to it as seriously as you can.

When you read the autobiographies of the great ajaans, they always have this element. Ajaan Lee, Ajaan Maha Boowa: They took their vows very seriously.

So it's an essential part of the practice.

Here we are, close to the beginning of the rains, which is a traditional time to take vows: The retreat gives you three months to try out a particular practice that you may not have done very well in the past or may not have done at all.

Focus on some of the precepts that you're weak in. Or add some precepts to what you've already got. If you're already observing five precepts, you can try the eight. It may not be for every day during the rains but more often than you have in the past. As for the monks, there are the dhutanga practices. Or you may focus on more time to meditate: more walking meditation, more sitting meditation. Or you may make up your mind you want to do more Dhamma reading.

But whatever your choice, you want to push things. Three months is not going to break you. It gives you a chance to build up a momentum.

At the end of the three months, if something really is good, you can stick with it, make it more of a permanent part of your practice. If you've discovered at the end of the three months that it's not working, okay, then you can put it aside. You haven't broken your vow.

As I've said many times in the past, the texts talk about four qualities that go into a vow:

discernment, truthfulness, relinquishment, calm. And as a general set these qualities all go together.

Discernment is the factor that figures out what you need. It includes the qualities of discernment that go into right effort. This begins with the motivation. How do you motivate yourself to do something that's really good? And how do you figure out what needs to be done and how much effort has to go into it, how much you're capable of?

This is what gets into the issue of another aspect of discernment, which is having a sense of yourself. What are your weaknesses right now? What are the strengths you have you can build on?

This is where it's good to look at a few of the standard lists. You can look at the precepts, you can look at the perfections. These are the qualities that were detected in the various stories that built up around the Buddha's previous lifetimes. In Theravada there are ten: generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance, truth, determination, goodwill and equanimity.

You can take that list and ask yourself, "Where are you lacking?" If you don't know about what it means to "lack" in these qualities, you can think about the practices of the people you've admired in the past. How do you stack up against them in terms of these qualities? Because these are things that are really good to work on.

Some of them are directly involved with meditation. You can do goodwill meditation more often, you can do an equanimity meditation more often. Other perfections develop qualities of the character that will transfer over into your practice. The persistence and the determination, the truthfulness, endurance: all the Capricorn virtues we all wish we had automatically and we don't want to work on.

Someone once asked Ajaan Maha Boowa what's the easy way to develop more persistence. He said, "Well, that's a lazy person's question right there." You develop more persistence by not being lazy and by putting in effort. How do you put in effort? Well, you learn how to motivate yourself.

Ajaan Fuang talked about how when he was young and actually began listening to the Dhamma, he looked at his lifetime up to that point. The more he'd listened to the Dhamma, the more he realized that he was lacking in a lot of merit. He was born into a very poor family, he'd lost his parents, wasn't doing well in school, didn't have many opportunities at all. He told himself, "I'm really lacking in the perfections."

So he made up his mind, "Okay, I've got to do something about this. I can't just wallow around in a really bad state like this." He knew a lot of people in his own position could easily end up going into a life of crime and he didn't want that. So he used that thought as a motivation. Every time he was getting lazy in his practice he would think about, "Where you've been is where you're going to go if you keep on being lazy."

So you have to find what motivates you to practice, what gives more oomph to your

practice. Because when you make a vow, you're going to run up against times when you suddenly decide, "Ah, this is too harsh," or "This is too heavy." Then you have to know when you're lying to yourself, when you're just trying to find the easy way out.

So of the four qualities, discernment rightly comes first: to figure out what you need to do, how you need to build a particular quality into your character, into your practice, how to motivate yourself, how to figure out how much you can push yourself, and how much pushing is needed in order to make a difference.

All of this comes under the quality of having a sense of yourself, which the Buddha listed as one of the qualities of a great man, a great person: the ability to read yourself and see what you need, see where you're lacking.

When you see that, then you stick to your vow, you're true to it. And you try to figure out all kinds of ways that when it's difficult you can make it easy for yourself.

This is the trick to persistence, this is the trick to effort and endurance: not focusing on how hard it is but focusing instead on where you've got strengths, what you can build on, so that you can be true to what you've decided to do—so that when the times comes that you have to relinquish something you really like, you can do it with a sense of calm, confident that you're making a good trade. Because that's what renunciation and relinquishment are all about. You're not trying to starve yourself. You're trying to rechannel your energies, rechannel your interests in a more skillful direction.

You realize that you can't have your cake and eat it too. There are some skills where, if you're going to pick up them up, you have to abandon your desire to master something else.

I remember learning when I was young that if you want to be good at tennis you can't play the piano; if you want to be good at the piano you can't play tennis. I was disappointed because I liked both.

But it was true. Playing the piano and playing tennis push your elbow in different ways. In cases like that, you really do have to focus on what you want and be willing to give up some things that seem perfectly okay but actually are antithetical to what you want. You have to have a sense of your priorities. And this again is where discernment comes in: What's really important in your life?

Ajaan Fuang would talk about building a memorial, building a monument with your life: something that you can hold in your memory as an accomplishment really worth looking back on, looking back on with pride—that you made the right decision and you stuck with it.

So foster these qualities of truthfulness and relinquishment—and calm, the last one, learning how to have a calm attitude when things are tough. All of these things keep coming back to discernment: realizing what's important in life and also learning how to motivate yourself, learning how to use your discernment to take something that seems hard and make it easier.

Ajaan Lee's teachings on the breath are a really good example of this. He had a lot of

illnesses in his life and he learned how to use his breath as a way of overcoming the pain, overcoming the weakness. As a result, he became a real master in that topic of meditation.

Something that's free: The breath comes in, goes out all the time. They still haven't figured out a way to privatize that. So you take advantage of what you've got, simple things lying right around you. That, Ajaan Lee said, is the essence of discernment.

So look right around you: Where are you lacking? Where do you have strengths you can build on to overcome the lack? When you have that sense of yourself, then you can progress in the practice, making something of yourself, making something of your practice.

We're not here just to accept whatever's coming our way. We're here to accept what we've got so that we can know where to build on it to attain something better.

As the Buddha said, we're here to attain the as-yet-unattained, to realize the as-yet-unrealized, to achieve the as-yet-unachieved.

We're going in a direction. And to do that, you have to have a strong sense of where you want to go and what you have to do in order to get there—and then the determination to make it come true.