

Building Character

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I had a student in Thailand who was always itching to get out into the forest, complaining that life in the monastery was placing too many constrictions on his meditation. And so finally he got out into the forest, he had own his little hut, his own mountain—nothing to do but meditate all the day long. Yet for the first couple of months, his meditation was miserable. And there was nobody he could blame it on. He couldn't blame it on the schedule; he couldn't blame it on other people; he couldn't blame it on the location. All the convenient scapegoats were gone. So finally he took himself in hand and reminded himself, "Well, at the very least, I'm learning the perfection of endurance."

There are several lessons to be drawn from that. One is to remember that there are bound to be ups and downs in the meditation. You have to watch out for the tendency to want to be a jhana junky or an insight junky. In other words, to go for the hits and then to feel frustrated when you can't get the mind to settle down like before, to get the insights you had before. You're not in the zone that meditators like to get into. In cases, like that, you've got to learn how to deal with those ups and downs in a mature way, instead of being like the typical junky who just gets really frustrated and difficult to deal with when he can't indulge in his addiction, can't get the hit, can't get the pleasure he wants.

We're here to build character, not just to have the hits of insight or the hits of concentration. When you think of that phrase "building character," you immediately think of *Calvin and Hobbes*. One my favorite cartoons is where Calvin does an imitation of his father and says, "Calvin, build some character. Go do something you hate." Now, there are a lot of things that build character that we don't like, but the trick is learning how not to hate doing them, learning to actually like them. Now, that monk's saving thought there was, "At least I'm developing something good out of this, developing some character." There is something to show for this, and to actually enjoy it.

We had that phrase in the chant just now about right effort—learning how to generate desire to abandon unskillful qualities, and to generate the desire to develop the skillful ones. In other words, you have to talk yourself into liking what you're doing. And to see this as an opportunity to develop good qualities all around. There are good qualities to be developed by meditating, and other good qualities to be developed by working in the orchard, good qualities

to be developed by cleaning up. The nice thing about being in a monastery and doing these things is that nobody is competing with you, no one is making it a race to see who has better qualities. But you can make it a race with yourself.

Ajaan Fuang used to call this “looking for the grass at the corral door.” He once was taking a group of his students up to meditate at the chedi, and somebody had left a huge mess. So instead of meditating, they had to clean up the mess. One of the women complained, asking, “What kind of person would leave a mess like this?” And he said, “Don’t criticize them. They gave us this opportunity to make some merit.”

Then he told the story about the grass at the corral gate. As soon as you open the corral gate, all the cows go rushing out to look for the grass out in the meadow. There’s grass right there at the post to the gate, but none of the cows eat that. There’s something right nearby, something you could do, and there’s a good benefit for your character that comes out of that. So look around—there are opportunities to do good everywhere. And think of all the good qualities you’re developing.

There’s that phrase “spiritual materialism,” which makes people look down on the idea of getting something out of the practice. And the phrase *is* properly applied to the idea that you’re going to get a hit every time you sit down and close your eyes—the rapture is going to come, the bliss is going to come, the insights are going come pouring out of the mind. And then you sit there, and of course it doesn’t happen, and you get frustrated. That kind of materialism actually keeps you immature.

But there’s another kind of materialism around the good qualities of the mind you can develop. There’s the list of the perfections—generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment; persistence, endurance—all those good Capricorn virtues; truth, determination, goodwill, equanimity. As Ajaan Fuang liked to say about the Buddha that when was born in all his many lifetimes up until he became a Buddha, he was born for the sake of developing these qualities, for the sake of mastering these perfections.”

The list in the suttas is in the noble treasures—conviction; a sense of shame, a sense of compunction; virtue; learning; generosity, and discernment. These are treasures that, as you build them into your mind, they’re there for a good long time—no one else can take them away. They stick with you even after death.

Trying to amass these things is not bad or immature, it’s actually good, because as you’re amassing these things, of course you’re not taking anything away from anyone else. You’re

spreading the good benefits around. This is a kind of greed, you might call it, that actually has no bad consequences. So when things are difficult, look around!

I knew of another monk—I didn't know him personally but I had read an article he had written one time, about how when he had gone to Asia, he tended to look down on the monks and nuns who puttered around the monastery. He was going to do nothing but meditate. And he found that, of course, his meditation got pretty dry very quickly. There's something uplifting about just doing a little something good here and there. Nothing that anyone has forced you to do, something you voluntarily decide to do—to clean up a little bit, or to straighten things out a little bit, or whatever. And the monk noticed that the people who were doing this actually had the juice to keep their meditation going.

All of this relates to a quality that Ajaan Maha Boowa defined as singleness of mind—*ekaggata*. He said that in his definition of the term, it's not that the mind is one pointed. It's that the mind has a solid stability that can weather the ups and downs. Whether they're ups and downs in outside conditions or ups and downs in your meditation—whatever the ups and downs, you want to have the mind on an even keel so that you can take them in stride—so that when the hits come, you're not overwhelmed by them; and when they don't come, you don't start behaving like a cocaine addict who's desperate for the next hit.

If you're a meditation junkie, you get surrounded by a sea of annoyance—everything all around you is bad; everything is wrong. And there's a certain charge that comes with that—that your anger is justified; that these things really are unfair, they're really not right. And you can be right. But to get angry over them is wrong. Still, there's a charge that comes with that. On the one hand, it lets you off the hook—the meditation isn't going well, but it's not because of you, it's because of these horrible outside conditions. On the other hand, there's the physical charge that comes when you get angry—the adrenaline comes and there's a surge of energy. You feed on that—but it's really miserable food. It's aggravating food.

What you want feed on is the sense that here's an opportunity to straighten things out a little bit, clean things up a little bit. Look for the opportunities to do good. They're there. There is a sense of well-being that comes with being generous. And sometimes what your meditation needs is a little bit of that juice—the juice that comes from a generous mind.

So this is the kind of character we're trying to build until eventually it's like the character of the Buddha, who commented that in the course of quest for awakening, he never let pain overcome his mind, he never let pleasure overcome his mind. He was able to use pain and use pleasure as he kept developing all of his perfections, as he kept building his character.

And when you have that quality of character, you find that it's even more solid than your concentration. Concentration gives a solidity of one sort. But the solidity of a well-built character can carry you through even when the concentration gets weak, or the concentration has its ups and downs, or the insights don't come. It allows you to develop discernment in other ways.

We all think that insight means seeing things in terms of inconstancy, stress, not self; seeing the structure of nature of reality and how empty it all is. And those are the important insights. But there are other insights in realizing: How do you keep yourself going? How do you maintain your stamina in the midst of the ups and downs? That requires insight, too. And it gives you really good insights into the workings of your mind. You come across defilements you wouldn't have seen otherwise.

So insights are everywhere—as you're trying to develop good qualities of mind, as you're trying to build your character, as you learn to do things you don't like to do but you learn to want to do them. Learn to look for them, and you'll see them.