

The Heart to Keep Going

October 26, 2016

When the texts give maps for the practice—this can be in the Canon or in the teachings of the ajaans—they make it sound very smooth: step by step, easy, smooth, one directional practice, always and ever up. But you look at your own practice, though, and it goes up and comes down, up and down. It's easy to get frustrated by that, but it's not wise.

The wise attitude is to take things one step at a time, and to remember that the mind is a complex phenomenon. Ajaan Lee makes a comparison. He says that some people's minds are like banana trees—they have only one leaf to create, so they grow very fast. Large trees, though, have to create lots of branches and lots of leaves, and so they grow slowly. So don't compare yourself with the texts; don't compare yourself with other people whose practice is like a banana tree and seems to be going faster than yours. After all, your practice is your practice. Maybe it's going to be a big tree. And whatever kind of tree it is, it's essential for your well being.

And remember that we're not here just for the pleasure and the rapture that can come with concentration. We're here for all the other skills that go into training the mind. Each time you find the mind wandering off and you bring it back, that's strengthening a very essential skill—the skill to get your mind off a bad topic and bring it back to a good one. Even though this may happen many times, the fact that you're able to come back many times is a good sign.

At the same time, you're also developing the observer inside, what in some places they call *meta consciousness*—the ability to watch your own mind, to observe your own mind, and not get sucked into all of its stories and moods. The moods and the stories are one thing, but your awareness is something else. Each time you pull out of a thought world, you strengthen that sense of the separate observer. And that's a *very* useful skill as you go through the day.

Sometimes it's difficult to take the sense of ease you get in meditation and carry it off the cushion to back into the day. Sometimes it happens easily, but sometimes it's hard. But what you *can* take, all the time, are the skills—the skills of not just riding with your mind whichever direction it seems to run. And even though it may run for a while, the fact that you're pulling back a little bit, that's part of right effort.

Right effort is an essential factor in the path—generating desire, upholding your intent, maintaining your persistence to abandon unskillful qualities that have arisen. Notice that the unskillful qualities are there, and you're going to do battle with them—you're going to figure out one way or another to get yourself motivated to do it, and to stick with the effort.

This is one area where desire is actually a helpful thing. The desire to want to do this well is not a bad thing. I've been reading a couple of explanations of right resolve, and strangely enough they interpret the resolve for renunciation to mean the resolve to renounce *all* desires. That's not what the Buddha said. "Renunciation" here means renouncing sensuality—the mind's tendency to waste a lot of its time planning tomorrow's sensual pleasures, or your sensual pleasures for the next hour, whatever. You can go over those fantasies for hours at a time—thinking about how you would like this, how you'd like it like that, or no, maybe change this little bit here, and so on. You can keep going around and around and around this way, and the mind really feeds on this kind of thinking. That's what we're trying to renounce. If you're aiming to get the mind with the breath, that counts as your intent to get away from sensuality. And then you try to strengthen that.

Then you try to figure out ways to remind yourself of why you're doing this, to keep yourself motivated. You can use the principle of heedfulness, realizing that if you can't do it now when you're in relatively good health, relatively sane, what are you going to do, say, if pain gets really really bad and you start getting delirious? The mind would just jump for *anything* that seems pleasant. And you know what happens to people who jump at anything—they end up jumping into places they later regret.

You want to have some control over the mind so that it doesn't go shunting off into that area. You have to remind yourself of why you don't want to get involved in the waste of time that's sensual thinking. Part of your approach is to keep trying to develop a sense of the pleasure that can come from form, the way you feel the body from within. Whether or not the pleasure comes automatically, the fact that you're aiming in this direction—trying to think of the breath, trying to think of the body right here, right now, as you feel it from within—that's all right effort.

As for the complaining voices that may come up saying that it's a waste of time to meditate, that you're not getting anywhere: You have to learn how to slough those off, too. Don't listen to them. Don't identify with them. Always try to identify with the effort.

Ajaan Mun, toward the end of his life, gave a Dhamma talk about going into battle with the defilements. Your determination not to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements ever again: That's the soldier in his analogy. The soldier has the weapon of discernment, and is fed by concentration. But what keeps the soldier going is that firm determination—a firm desire not to be fooled by greed, aversion, or delusion ever again. That's your motivation. That's *you* right now. And the more you can make that “you” identify with all the thoughts that cluster around that identity, the easier it'll be to let go of the other identities that would pull you away and say, “Well, I just want to meditate a little bit so I can have some nice relaxation. I'd like to have a nice smooth, quiet evening in the mind right now; I don't want to have to work or think or anything.”

Actually, though, you're here in battle. You've got to do battle with your greed, aversion, and delusion. Sometimes they get really quiet, and it doesn't seem like much of a battle. Other times, they can be really hard. So you want to work on the skills. You don't want a nice, pleasant, easy meditation, and to satisfy yourself with that. You have ask yourself, “What skills am I learning? Sometimes when greed does become strong or anger becomes strong, then I'll have the skills I need so that I don't get taken in.”

Now, even though we are in battle, we do want a sense of ease. That's why the Buddha makes concentration—with a sense of ease and refreshment—an important element of the path. But on the days when the ease and refreshment aren't coming quickly, you have to learn how to feed yourself with something else, and to stick with that determination not to come back—or at the very least the determination not to be fooled by your greed, aversion, and delusion again. Otherwise, they'll find some smooth-talking ways to fool you. That's what happens when you give in to the voice that says, "This is a waste of time, the meditation is not going anywhere; I'd be better off doing xxx." If you give in to that, they laugh at you, the defilements—they've tricked you again.

So you need an element of pride in here, but it's skillful pride: the pride of mastering a skill—a harmless skill, a useful skill, a skill that can take you someplace that you've never been before.

Now, this skill may take time, but don't think about how far away the goal is or how long it's going to take. Each step you take—as long as it's in the right direction—is a step well made. Learn how to encourage yourself in that way. That, too, is an important skill to take out of the meditation and into the daily life. There will be times when you'll come up against difficulties—things in the world are going in all directions right now. Who knows where things are going to go? You want the skills of the mind that say, "Okay, I can handle whatever comes up. I'm not going to be overwhelmed by anything." That's what you learn in the meditation.

You realize that one of the big things that weakens you is a mind that's out of control, where you just give in to whatever its mood is. When you start siding with moods that way, who knows where they're going to take you? But even though the mood is there—frustrated, upset, whatever—part of the mind is separate. It can watch and not run along with the mood. *That's* what you need. Without that you're lost.

This separate observer that we're working on here, that can pull out of a thought at least for a little bit, is something you want to develop again and again and again. That's the basis for gaining the control you're going to need so that your mind doesn't take you places you don't want to go.

So remember that even though the pleasure and refreshment are an important part of the meditation, they're not the whole meditation. The skills you learn to keep your mind under control: Those are the essential parts. Even if they don't come quickly or easily, the fact that they're coming and that you're moving in that direction: That's something that should give you heart—the heart to keep going.