

Noble Treasures

September 9, 2013

Ajaan Lee once gave a Dhamma talk on the topic of the noble treasures: seven qualities of mind that, as the Buddha said, are not burned by fire, not washed away by floods, can't be stolen, can't be seized by robbers or kings.

You probably know the list: conviction, virtue, a sense of shame, a sense of compunction, learning, generosity, and discernment.

When he got to the end of the talk, Ajaan Lee said that of the seven, the most important one is your discernment. If you have discernment, he said, all you need is a single machete and you can set yourself up in life.

In other words, you may not have a lot of other advantages but if you can think things through and use your ingenuity, you can work your way around all kinds of obstacles.

Ajaan Lee himself was an example of a person of discernment. He had a lot of health problems. He died at age 55. He'd had a heart attack about ten years prior to that, and it was because of the heart attack that he developed the method of meditation that we practice now: working with the breath energies in the body.

When you read the instructions he gives of how to work with the breath energies, you notice that it's very clearly based on what a person who is suffering heart problems will need. You start with the breath coming in through the back of the neck, going down through the spine, because the back of the neck is where there's a lot of tension when there's trouble with the heart.

What this means of course is that you look at *your* problems, your health problems and figure out, "What's needed here? What kind of breath energy would be good for this particular problem?" Try your ingenuity. Use your machete. If your first idea doesn't work out, well, try another idea. Learn how to turn your ideas inside out.

The important thing is that you never give up. You keep at this. At the very least, it means that you're taking a proactive approach. You're not simply a victim of situations. You will run into things that you can't change with the breath, but you'll know them only after you've tried. You don't give up first.

So in Ajaan Lee's case even though he had a short life, he got a lot out of it, largely by using his ingenuity. When something was difficult, he'd figure out a way around it. If nothing else, he'd make a vow to focus his energy and his attention to really understand a problem.

This aspect of meditation is all too often overlooked, especially in methods

that give you a set body of instructions and say, “Just do this and don’t make any variations.” But how do you know that the results you get from just following a method like that, putting the mind through the meat-grinder, are going to be genuine? How do you know that those insights are true?

The whole point of insight, the whole point of discernment, is that you see cause and effect. And the only way you’re going to see cause and effect is by manipulating the causes and seeing how that changes the effects.

So here we’re trying to get the mind to settle down. At the same time, we find that there are issues in the body. We all have them, and you can use them as your motivation for wanting to figure out this problem: How can you get the mind to settle down in a body that’s not really in good shape? Partly to energize the body but primarily to give energy to the mind.

Ajaan Fuang had a number of students who had chronic health problems. In the years I’ve been going back to Thailand, I’ve noticed that the ones who have chronic health problems are the ones who really stick with the meditation, because they find that their lives and their well-being really depend on it.

So approach this as you would any puzzle, always convinced that it’s not beyond your ability to figure it out. In some cases, that may mean learning how to live with certain physical limitations but using the good qualities of the mind to compensate. That right there can be your noble treasure.

Then look at the other noble treasures and see which ones you need to work on as well. After all, that’s one of the duties of discernment: to figure out where you’re lacking.

How’s your conviction? Conviction in the Buddha’s awakening means conviction that human beings can do this. You’re a human being, you’re in the scope of the Buddha’s teachings, so you’ve got this possibility, too.

Look at your virtue. Your sense of shame. The word “shame” has gotten really bad press, especially here in the States, even though we could use more of a sense of shame. You have to realize that there’s a healthy sense of shame and an unhealthy one. The healthy one, which we’re trying to develop, is the one that says, “That particular action is beneath me. I would feel ashamed to do it.” And based on that sense of shame, you don’t do it. It’s your motivation for being virtuous, your motivation for avoiding harmful behavior whether it comes under the precepts or not.

Compunction, which goes along with shame, basically focuses on the results of the actions. You realize, “I can’t be apathetic. I care about the results of my actions. I want to make sure I don’t do any harm.”

Then there’s learning, here meaning the knowledge of the Dhamma you get

from listening to Dhamma talks and from reading. You might try memorizing a couple of the Buddha's teachings, some of the short ones like you get in the Dhammapada, the Itivuttaka, the Udana. Phrases you can call to mind when you need them.

This is one of the reasons why we do the chanting over and over and over again: to get the rhythm of the chant and the words and the message of the chants into your body, into your mind.

Everyone's had the experience of having a melody going through your head over and over and over again. It depends on what you listen to a lot. So listen to the chanting a lot. Engage in the chanting a lot. Get that rhythm, get that melody in your head, so that if there's going to be a melody in your head, let it be, "May I be happy. May all living beings be happy. All living beings are the owners of their actions." All these things are good to keep in mind so that you can call them to mind when you need them.

Generosity is generosity of spirit. You can express it through giving material things, giving your time, giving your energy. It's an expansive quality of mind and it brings with it a sense of wealth: You realize that you've got more than you need and you're willing to share.

All of these qualities are noble treasures, things you can take with you. Because as we train the mind, we're training it in certain qualities. And the qualities do carry over from one life to the next.

Often we don't think about which qualities we're training ourselves in. We could be training ourselves in some pretty unskillful ones. We don't think of it as training, but that's what it is. You're directing the mind in a particular direction.

So when you think about what you're going to take with you—and this can apply to what you take with you when you leave the monastery, or to what you take with you when you leave this body—the best things to take are good qualities of mind.

Ajaan Mun once made the comment that qualities like virtue are really, really valuable. If people could steal them, they would. But that's the nice thing about them: You can't steal somebody's virtue, you can't steal somebody's generosity. Nobody can steal yours. These things stick with you wherever you go.

So look at the qualities you're developing, because those are your treasures. When you get home and open your bags, this is what you want to find: generosity, conviction, discernment. Good things, things that are worth carrying around.

Fortunately, you don't have to wear yourself down as you carry them around. They're light. The unskillful qualities are the ones that are really heavy luggage, and when you open up they're worthless. It's like packing your bags with scraps: scraps

of iron, scraps of whatever, old chunks of cement, lugging them around and then finding they're of no use at all when you get back home or to the next lifetime.

So work on the qualities that are light, that you don't have to lug around, and they'll provide you with what you need wherever you go.