

Circumspection

April 26, 2021

Today marks the sixtieth anniversary of Ajaan Lee's passing. It's good to reflect on our ajaans. We're practicing their teachings, so it's good to reflect on the type of people they were so that we can inspire ourselves, to see whatever virtues they had that we can develop within us.

When Ajaan Fuang talked about Ajaan Lee, two features stood out. One was what he called his large-heartedness. Ajaan Lee wanted to make the teachings available to people of all sorts. He wanted to help a lot of people. That was a sign of his compassion. When he wrote down *The Divine Mantra*, he said that when you're reflecting on the Buddha, you should reflect on his purity. When you reflect on the Dhamma, you reflect on Sariputta in his wisdom. When you reflect on the Sangha, you reflect on Moggallana with his psychic powers and his compassion. It's an interesting connection: psychic powers and compassion. Ajaan Lee did have a lot of psychic powers, and he devoted them to compassionate purposes. He helped people with their poverty. He helped people with their illnesses. When he would go into the forest, it wasn't just to have a good time in the forest, or to have a little seclusion. He often went because there was somebody there, even out in the wilderness, that he had to help.

But before he could help them that way, he had to make sure that his own practice was solid.

That was the second feature that Ajaan Fuang would talk about. Ajaan Lee approached the practice as a skill—a *vijja*. Ajaan Lee himself would often draw parallels between the practice and manual skills. Meditating is like making clay tiles, he said. Meditating is like being a good cook. Meditating is like taking silver and learning what you can do with the silver. It's like learning how to sew a pair of pants, weave a basket. In all these cases, you commit yourself to the practice, and then you reflect on what you're doing. There's a passage in the Canon—it's strange that it appears only once—where the Buddha says the Dhamma is to be found and nurtured through two qualities: commitment and reflection. These are precisely the qualities you need as you develop the meditation as a skill. You commit yourself to the practice. You put in the hours. You put in the effort. You're sincere in what you do. Then you watch what you do. You step back to see how you're doing it, to see how well you're doing it.

You have to develop what's called an all-around eye, or as Ajaan Lee would put it, circumspection—*khwaam rawb khawb* in Thai. It relates to the quality of

alertness. When he described mindfulness practice, he said alertness is like a pulley that you pull in one direction and then pull in another direction. You look at the breath. Then you look at the mind. Make sure that both of them are snug together.

This is how you turn your practice into a skill. You keep looking at what you're doing. You look at the results, and then you don't blame the results on the weather. You don't blame them on outside factors. You say, if it's not right, "There must be something I'm doing that's not quite right." So you'll watch what you're doing. When you're focusing on the breath, how strong is your focus? When you're holding a concept of the breath in mind, what is the concept? The best way to ferret these things out is to experiment.

You look at the various ways Ajaan Lee has of explaining the breath energy in the body. Those all come from his experimentation, and part of experimenting is to flip things around. That's what he said was the key to making sure that you didn't get involved in what are called the corruptions of insight. If you latch on to something as being true, you have to ask yourself, "To what extent is it false? And to what extent is the opposite true?" You try things out. Otherwise, you have an idea that x must be true and you hold on to it. When you decide you've confirmed it for yourself, then you hold on to *that*. You can develop some strong attachments around your insights, which will spoil them.

Take for instance the teaching on not-self. Ajaan Lee has a really interesting way of approaching it. He says you take what's inconstant and turn it into something constant. You take what's stressful and turn it into something easeful. You take what's not-self and you get it under your control.

You see this in two areas of Ajaan Lee's teachings. One is when he's talking about concentration practice: your mind, which is flitting all over the place, you turn into a mind that can stay in one place. With the sense of the body as you feel it from within, which has its aches and its pains, you find where its potential for pleasure is, and you maximize that.

This is one of Ajaan Lee's real contributions to the Buddhist tradition. The Buddha says to breathe in and out sensitive to rapture, breathe in and out sensitive to the pleasure, but he doesn't say how. He also says that once there's a sense of rapture and pleasure, you allow it to spread throughout the body. He gives analogies, the analogy of the bathman working the water through the pile of bath powder, or the analogy of the lake in which the waters from the spring spread through the lake. But he doesn't give any more explanation than that.

Ajaan Lee, talking about the breath energies in the body, provides a really good clue as to how to do these things. You get so that you can saturate the breath with

good energy, saturate the body with good breath, saturate the body with a sense of ease. This is how you turn your concentration into a skill. It becomes something under your control.

Then he says that you begin to realize that even the state of mind which is now constant, easeful, and under your control—even that has to be let go, again through reflection. You begin to see that even it has its subtle inconstancy, stress, the areas where it's not fully under your control. But you wouldn't have known that if you hadn't pushed in the opposite direction.

The same with discernment. You develop the discernment that sees through your attachments. It shows you how you can let them go. And then you have to let go of that discernment, too. That, Ajaan Lee says, is where you have to turn around and apply the insight that all dhammas are not-self to *that* insight as well. It, too, is not-self. It, too, is to be let go of. Remember, we're not here to arrive at wisdom or discernment or insights. We're here to arrive at release, and release can't be total unless you let go of everything.

But you let go in stages.

As Ajaan Lee said, first you abandon what's unskillful and you hold on to what's skillful. And as he saw, when you do that, you're going to be developing a sense of self around that what is skillful. You have to do that. There are people who say, "If you get the mind centered like this, you're trying to get it under your control, and there's going to be a sense of self. We know that everything is not-self, therefore you have to not try to get anything under your control." That doesn't work. It's not the Buddha's path. You have to approach the issue strategically. And Ajaan Lee saw that.

So there will be a sense of self involved in getting the path together. Once it's put together and it's done its job, then you let go of what's skillful. As he said, nibbana has no need for right views or wrong views, has no need for views at all, has no need for truths at all. Remember, the word "truth" can have two different meanings. One is a statement about facts, and the other is a fact itself. You use the statements to arrive at the fact itself. But part of arriving means that you have to let go of the statements, too, at some point.

So these are the things you learn through being circumspect, through reflecting.

When we think about Ajaan Lee and all the good that he did—all the good he did for other people, all the good he did for himself—we realize that it came from qualities like this. And these are qualities that we can emulate. This is the whole purpose of recollection of the Sangha: to remember that the members of the noble Sangha didn't simply follow orders. At the same time, they weren't out there

being totally creative. They committed themselves to what the Buddha said had to be done. But they realized that in order to do it well, they had to reflect. They had to be circumspect. And it was because they had become really circumspect like this that when they helped others, they had something of solid value to offer.

So as we appreciate the things of solid value that we've learned from Ajaan Lee, at the very least we want to make sure we can develop them within ourselves. And if we have the time and opportunity, we're happy to pass them along. But make sure they're solid within you first. Make sure that what you've got can stand the test. You turn around and look: What are you doing? Is what you've got good from all sides? Try to develop that all-around eye, and that's how the Dhamma is passed on: partially through the words, but primarily through qualities of the heart that are fostered like this.