

Helping Others

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The Canon often presents a linear picture of the practice, where you work on your virtue and then you work on your concentration and then on your discernment. We like to think it's nice and stepwise that way. But, in practice, we discover that you have to work on all three at once.

Virtue without concentration gets very dry after a while and, without discernment, you can be holding to the rules but misunderstanding their purpose. The same with concentration: Without discernment, you can just sit there very, very still but not really make much progress.

There's a story Ajaan Lee tells of the old monk who'd practiced "*Buddho, Buddho, Buddho,*" nothing but *Buddho* and the breath—hadn't done any adjustment of the breath, hadn't engaged in any directed thought and evaluation—and it didn't go anywhere.

It takes some discernment to see, when you're sitting down to meditate, what's in the way and, when you gain a state of concentration, how you maintain it. Then you look for the subtle disturbances so that you can know what to let go of next.

In fact, it's such a basic principle of the Forest Tradition—that you work on all these three aspects of the training at the same time—that when Ajaan Lee wrote his very first book on the practice, that was one of the principles he highlighted. Not only does virtue foster your concentration and discernment, but your concentration fosters virtue and discernment; discernment fosters concentration and virtue.

When Ajaan MahaBoowa wrote *his* first book on meditation practice, the title of the book was *Discernment Fosters Concentration*. He devoted a whole section to the topic.

So apparently this, for them, was the most striking part of studying with Ajaan Mun: the need for the practice to be a whole practice from the very beginning.

The same principle applies as you practice the Dhamma in daily life. We like to think that we can get our minds in order—get everything straightened out inside—and *then* we help other people. But there are times when other people need help and we're not really ready yet, and yet we cannot *not* help them. So that's a case where, one, you use whatever virtue, concentration, and discernment you have, because after all, that's how these things get developed: by putting them to use. You may say, "I'm not ready," but there's work that needs to be done.

Then two, you remember at the same time that it's not a question of either practicing *or* helping other people. The two principles go together.

As many of the Forest ajaans would note, people would come to them and say, "I don't have any time to practice at all."

They'd respond, "Well, do you have time to breathe?"

"Yes."

"Okay, then you've got time to practice. Focus on your breath when you can."

Remember what the Buddha had to say on the topic: As you do your practice, you're like an acrobat who can maintain his or her balance. To whatever extent you can do that, you're helping other people maintain their balance, or at least you're making it easier for them to maintain their balance.

At the same time, when you're helping other people, you develop qualities inside that are going to be good for your own practice—endurance, equanimity, goodwill, sympathy—as you develop these qualities in helping other people.

Notice that the Buddha includes endurance in there, because, as he says, it's not going to be easy. Sometimes the people we love the most are the ones who are hardest to deal with, and we have to be able to put up with a lot, which is what endurance means: not simply that we bear with it but that we also don't react in unskillful ways. The examples throughout the Canon are of people who are mistreated but don't show their anger. The anger may be there, but they learn how to keep it under control.

That element of restraint that goes with endurance is part of being an intelligent being. This is what separates beings from simple pieces of matter. Beings can take in influences from outside and decide which ones to act on, which ones not to, and organize a response. Exercising restraint is part of doing that intelligently.

There may be things you want to say, but you know that if you say them there's going to be trouble. So you hold back, but you don't just stuff your words into the mind and wait for them to explode. You hold back, but you remind yourself, "Maybe the right time hasn't come yet, but I'll keep my eyes open for when it *does* come."

And of course, goodwill reminds you that you want to find happiness in a way that doesn't harm anybody.

Equanimity reminds you there are a lot of things in life you can't control. So you work around them and look for areas where you can be of help. That exercises your discernment.

So it is possible to exercise your concentration and discernment while you're helping other people. That way, you don't look at it simply as an interference. A lot of important Dhamma lessons can be learned that way.

In my own case, when Ajaan Fuang got sick, it always seemed to be at inconvenient times. I'd have a project that I was working on and I'd have to put it down and sometimes stay with him way late at night. I'd get just a couple hours of sleep each day. It was pretty exhausting, and he was very particular about how his attendant looked after him. So I learned a lot. A lot of it was how to maintain my state of concentration in the midst of difficult situations.

Even with Ajaan Mun: We like to think that his life was totally devoted to the practice—he went out in the forest and did nothing but meditate—but that's not the case. There was one time when he and Ajaan Sao were on tudong and they came to the town of That Phanom, where they found an old ruined chedi. They learned in their meditation that the chedi had genuine relics, but it was all fallen down. So they stopped their wandering for a while and got the locals together, and they rebuilt the chedi.

We usually don't think of Ajaan Mun being involved in construction, but he was for a while. But he did it in such a way that his mind didn't deteriorate. Then, when the job was done, he moved on.

When he went into the forest, he wasn't simply going to places that he thought would be nice places to meditate. Sometimes he knew of places where there were people or spirits he had to teach. He had to put up with a lot of difficulties, but it all contributed to his skill in concentration because he took it as that: a challenge in how to maintain concentration and to exercise his discernment even in spite of difficulties.

So we have to remember that this is how concentration and discernment get exercised: not only as we do the formal practice, but also as we're called on to help other people.

We may say we're not ready yet, but it's like going down to the gym. You go down to the gym, you see all the people in the gym, and they're big and muscular while you're little and scrawny. You keep thinking, "Maybe I should wait until I'm big and muscular, and then I'll come." But how do you get that way if that's what you want? You start with the weights you can lift, and learn when something is too big to take on. If there are large jobs, you learn how to break them up into small ones. You take those little scrawny muscles you've got and you exercise them. That's how they get strong.

So when you are called on to help others, remember: It's not an interference in the practice. It's just a different way of practicing—a different set of challenges—

and if you approach the challenges with the right attitude, they can be an opportunity to grow.