

Remembering Ajaan Lee

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Ajaan Lee wrote two books on the establishing of mindfulness, and each one is distinctive. The first one is distinctive because of the emphasis he places on the three qualities you bring to the practice: mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. That's the recurring theme throughout the book.

Mindfulness he defines as keeping something in mind. As he points out, just the practice of simply keeping something in mind doesn't guarantee anything good at all. You can keep anything in mind. Even if you keep the body or feelings in mind, you may not necessarily get anywhere with them. There are two other qualities that need to be brought together with the mindfulness to make it do its work. One is alertness, when you're actually watching what you're doing, and you keep referring back to the mind. You look at the breath, say, but you're also keeping track of the mind. How is the mind staying with the breath? The alertness is what actually keeps you there, keeps you together with your object. And then the other quality is ardency. Ajaan Lee defines ardency in different ways as he goes through the book. First, it's just the effort that you put into focusing on something, but it also develops into the effort you put into figuring it out, analyzing it.

So we're not here just accepting what's happening. We're trying to figure out what's happening, look for the causes. Of course, this fits in with the four noble truths. We're looking for the cause of suffering. We want to see what arises together with the suffering, what passes away together with the suffering, so that we can know where it comes from. And this focused analysis is also a burning away of the defilement. As soon as you see the defilement for what it is, and how stupid it is, and how harmful it is, and how unnecessary it is, that's what burns it away.

So as we're sitting here meditating, it's not just a matter of accepting whatever comes up, or being intimate with whatever comes up, or whatever the latest phrase that people like to use. You stick with the meditation so that you can understand it. And it does require some active movement of the mind.

This ties in with Ajaan Lee's teachings on concentration, in particular the role that directed thought and evaluation play in helping you to settle down. As he says, evaluation is the beginning of discernment. You take your thinking processes and you actually put them to use. You don't try to just shove them out of the mind. You figure out which thoughts are useful and which ones are not, and you

try to use useful kinds of thinking to stay right on target.

The image he uses is of a person holding on to a post, and then spinning around and around and around the post. He says, as long as you hold on tight to the post, the spinning around doesn't get you dizzy. But if you try to spin around out in the middle of the field without anything to hold onto, you get dizzy and just fall right down. So there's an active quality to the meditation in the evaluation, but it spins around your one object.

This fits in with the second book he wrote on the establishing of mindfulness, which ties mindfulness practice together with concentration practice. They're not two separate things. You hold something in mind, and you're alert to what's going on, and as you analyze what's going on, you get into the first jhana. And this is not jhana-lite.

You have to remember, Ajaan Lee among all of Ajaan Mun's students was said to have had the strongest powers of concentration. There are stories of his being able to stop the engine of a bus, of getting other people to levitate through the power of his concentration. His concentration was amazing. So the fact that you're thinking as part of the concentration doesn't mean that concentration is light. It means that you're bringing all of your mental powers to bear on it. Now, as you get more skilled, you will let go of the thinking to get into deeper stages of concentration, but you learn how to balance the thinking and the stillness all along the way. Because it's the balance between the two that enables you to develop the discernment that can root out your defilements or, as he said, burn them away.

So it's good to think about this as we practice. If you're having trouble settling down, ask yourself, well, what's the problem here? If you don't understand the problem, it's hard for the mind to settle down. So evaluation is not just a matter of analyzing the breath coming in and out, it also analyzes how you're relating to the breath. How are you thinking about the breath? What's pulling you away? Because sometimes in order to stay with the breath, you really do have to do some brush-clearing. If you see that there's a particular concern or a particular obsession that's pulling you away from the breath, you've got to deal with it. You can't just pretend it's not there.

That's where you use your focused powers of ardency to look at the defilement, whether it's greed or lust or aversion or delusion or whatever the defilement is. If it's really insistent, if it keeps coming back, you've got to look at it and figure out, well, why does the mind like this? And also look at what its drawbacks are. The Buddha talks about this, seeing both the allure and the drawbacks, so that you can figure out the escape.

This means that, as a meditator, you need lots of tools. And realize you're going to bring all of your mental powers to bear on the practice. Some of the tools are simply being mindful, and once you notice that you've slipped off, you come right back. No big problem. Other times, you really have to probe into the allure. Why are you lusting after this? Or why are you greedy for that? Or why do you hate this? Or why do you dislike that? What's going on? You have to dig around. You don't have to dig back to your childhood, just dig around into why right now are you focused on that? Other times, all you have to do is just look at the defilement, you relax around it, and it just goes away. As Ajaan Lee says, it gets embarrassed and it leaves you. Or you realize you're just holding onto some tension that you don't have to hold onto, and you let it go. That's one tactic.

Sometimes you read that that's the big tactic, learning how to soften up around it, or how to relax around it, whatever the problem is. That works for some problems, but not with everything. This, again, is part of having a skill, having a full panoply of tools, because you have to remember that your defilements have a lot of tools as well. You have to learn how to be strategic.

This is an aspect of the teaching that most people tend to forget. They think that, well, all you have to do is follow the Buddha's teachings and do what he tells you to do. You don't have to think too much about it, and some methods actually advise against thinking, but that leads you to end up in a blind alley.

Because after all, what is this path that we're following? It's made out of the aggregates. It, too, is fabricated, and eventually you're going to have to get rid of those fabrications. So you're using fabrications to work against fabrications. There are a lot of paradoxical elements in the path. If you read a basic textbook on early Buddhism, it all seems very straightforward and a little bit too simplistic. A lot of people, when they're looking for paradox, quickly slip over the early teachings and move on to the Mahayana.

I was talking one time to a young woman who was taking an introduction to Buddhist philosophy at a university nearby, and the professor was saying, okay, we're going to have to go through a little bit of the Pali Canon here, but the really interesting stuff will come in a couple weeks when we get to the Mahayana. And they taught the four noble truths as if there was nothing paradoxical in there at all. But there are huge paradoxes. Becoming is part of the problem, and yet you have to create a path, which is a form of becoming, to get beyond it. We're trying to get beyond fabrication, but you have to fabricate the path. We're going to be using the insights of what's inconstant, stressful, and not-self, and yet when you're developing concentration you're trying to create a state of mind that's constant and easeful and that you've got under your control.

This in particular is one of the paradoxes that Ajaan Lee liked to focus on. As he said, before the Buddha let go of everything as stressful, inconstant, and not-self, he first took what was stressful and turned it into something pleasant—as in the way we’re working with the breath right now. He took what’s inconstant—this changeable mind—and made it steady, solid. And all these things that are not-self, the Buddha learned how to take them—feeling and perception, form, fabrications, consciousness, all these aggregates that are ultimately beyond our control—and brought them under enough control to turn them into a path.

He used the path as a place to stand so that he could look at his other fabrications of the mind and see which things are really unskillful. When you provide yourself with a sense of ease, it’s a lot easier to let go of the old habits you have of feeding on things that are harmful, both for yourself and for other people. So you need to work on this path, to strengthen it, to keep it going, so that you can use it against everything that’s not the path. And then you turn the path on itself. Because ultimately you want to go beyond both constancy and inconstancy, stress and ease, self and not-self.

This is another theme you see often in Ajaan Lee’s teachings: that ultimately in nibbana even right view gets put aside. Nibbana doesn’t need right view or wrong view; it goes beyond the views. This is something a lot of people tend to forget. They think that the Buddha taught right view as the view of the enlightened mind. Well, the enlightened mind is something way beyond right view.

There’s that story in the Canon where Anathapindaka, who was a stream-enterer, was asked by some sectarians, “What are the Buddha’s views?” And here Anathapindaka was already a stream-enterer, yet he said, “I really don’t know fully what the Buddha’s views are.” So the perspective of the enlightened one is something that lies beyond the path, and right view is simply part of the path.

The path is our strategy, it’s our tactic. This is something you find again and again and again in Ajaan Lee’s teachings. You’ve got to think strategically if you’re going to get anywhere on the path. This keeps throwing you back on yourself, your own powers of observation, your own ingenuity, your own honesty. Those are the qualities that are absolutely essential to the path. As the Buddha once said, “Bring me someone who is observant and truthful, and I’ll teach that person the Dhamma.” But it’s not just being observant and truthful. You also need that element of ingenuity.

When you face a problem in your meditation, the Buddha’s not going to be there to whisper in your ear to tell you what to do. You find yourself facing a wall, you’ve got to figure out, “Well, maybe there’s some way around the wall. Maybe I’ve created the wall. How can I un-create it? How can I stop doing the things that

create the wall?” Because remember, look at things as actions. That’s one of the most useful ways of looking at the problems in the mind. There’s an activity that’s causing the problem.

Usually it’s a repeated activity. It’s been repeated so often that it seems solid. It’s like a noise that gets repeated again and again and again so quickly that it seems like a steady hum. But if you made a recording of it and slowed it down, you’d see that it comes and goes, comes and goes. It’s the same with all the problems in the mind. They seem solid, but you have to remember, they’re activities and the results of activities, which come and go. And you’ve got to figure out, okay, where is the mind doing this activity? That is one of the meanings of dhamma: an action.

So try to use your ingenuity and turn your perceptions inside out. As the Buddha said, perceptions are one of the factors that fabricate the mind. And you have to learn how to question your perceptions, the ones that you hold to so steadily. Maybe they’re the problem. Doing this helps to pull you back from your perceptions. And the way of mastering the aggregates, the way of letting go of the aggregates, is that you have to master them first as activities. It’s only when you master something that you really let it go. As Ajaan Lee said, it’s at that point you can let go like a wealthy person.

If you haven’t reached that point and you try to let go of the aggregates, you let go like a poor person, one who has nothing at all. But if you’ve developed all the good that can come out of the aggregates, then when you let them go, they’re not going to abandon you. They’re there. Then whenever you need them, you can pick them up and use them. It’s like a wealthy person who has lots of wealth in his house. He doesn’t have to carry it around. It’s there, though, for when he needs it.

We’ve got a lot of good things in these aggregates. The trick is learning how to figure out what’s good in here. It’s not all misery. The Buddha was able to take his aggregates and not only create states of concentration. He was also able to use the aggregates to act as discernment, to develop all kinds of psychic powers, to learn all kinds of things about the world. So there’s a lot of good in here to dig out. And it’s learning to figure out which is the good part and how it can be used wisely, which are the parts that you have to cast away: That’s a lot of the discernment right there.

It’s an area of discernment where the books can give us some guidance, but we have to learn how to use our own powers of observation and our own ingenuity to make the most of what we’ve got.

So when you look at Ajaan Lee’s teachings, these are some of the lessons you learn. And they’re lessons that are really worth taking to heart.