

Harmony Improv

January 2, 2008

Sukha sanghassa samaggi—happy is the harmony of the community. This is a really important principle as we practice together. It requires a lot of cultural adjustments for us, because the culture of a monastery is very different from the kind of culture we are accustomed to here in the States. Everything is voluntary, and everything is based on generosity. If you open your eyes and look around, everything you see here in the sala is a result of somebody's gift. The land we walk on everyday is a result of somebody's gift. Our practice should be a gift as well. This is the atmosphere in which we practice. It's very different from the dog-eat-dog world out there, where the old American principle that if you don't get along with other people, you just pick up and move because there's going to be space for you someplace else. Here we want to practice together. We want to make our presence here not only good for our own practice, but also helpful for other people's practice too.

This involves learning how to create harmony. Ajaan Lee has a simile: He says it's like a Thai orchestra. You need to have high-pitched instruments, low-pitched instruments, and middle-pitched instruments for it to sound good. In other words, you're going to be dealing with all the kinds of people here. Some people come simply because they want to make merit; other people come because they want to meditate. Some people come with really skillful intentions; others with just barely skillful intentions. We have to learn how to make it work.

You can take Ajaan Lee's analogy here and expand it a little bit further. Think about the difference between Western classical music and Thai classical music. In the West almost every orchestra has a conductor, and the conductor is really in charge. He not only keeps the beat but also basically shapes the whole sound of the orchestra. The best orchestras are the ones where a conductor tends to be a really forceful personality and who can keep everybody in line. Of course, the really good conductors know also how to make everyone want to play together, but the bottom line is that there is a set score based on what somebody wrote sometime in the past. Playing is simply a matter of interpretation of the score, but you don't get away from the score. And you've got the conductor in charge.

Thai classical music is very different. The conductor does only one thing, he keeps the beat. He actually sits in the back, and each section of the music has a basic tune, but nobody is supposed to play the tune as it's actually written. In fact, if everybody played in unison it would be considered a really dumb orchestra and not interesting at all. They are supposed to elaborate. Part of the elaboration means adding notes or leaving out certain notes or pulling the beat a little bit here and there and then catching up, playing a little bit before, playing a little bit after the beat, and listening to everybody else in the orchestra so that you can play off one another's elaborations. Many times you'll find in the orchestra that somebody's not there that day. Their child is sick or something else is going on, so the other members sometimes have to make up for the missing members. Or if one member of the orchestra is kind of weak, everybody else will do their part to pick up the slack. In other words, you're not just focused on the musical score and the conductor, you're also focused on listening to everybody else and seeing what needs to be added. The art of improvisation is an important part of making the music sound good.

Life in the monastery is very much like a Thai classic orchestra. Sometimes certain instruments are missing today, so you have to make up for the lack. Or if someone's got a really good improv going, you want to step back a little bit into the background. If nobody else has got one going, you can come to the fore. In other words, you listen to each other and figure out what needs to be done, what's lacking, and use your own powers of improvisation.

So think of that as you go through the day here in the monastery. Look around you. As Ajaan Lee once said, when you live in a monastery, your eyes have to be as big as the monastery, your ears have to be as big as the monastery. In other words, everybody has to learn how to encompass the whole picture, and if one member of the orchestra is a little weak, you don't push the person out. You just make allowances.

So think about this as you go through the day: that we are all here because of a quality of what the Thais call *nam cai*, which is literally translated as heart water or heart juice. It's the nourishing quality of the heart that makes us want to practice. But we all come with varying levels of understanding, varying levels of commitment. Some people are really eager to learn; other people are just barely here. So you want to have to learn how to help nourish everybody else's heart juice and not make it dry up.

This means learning also how to cultivate your own. Because when you learn how to cultivate the attitude of doing what needs to be done, you start learning how to deal with your own defilements, and the better you are dealing with your own defilements, the better you are at dealing with other people's defilements as well. One of the lessons I learned from my father is that there are a lot of jobs in the world that nobody wants to do. That's your great opportunity for making merit. I remember very vividly once when I was small, the cesspool in the house where we were living out in a farm in Long Island was getting full. So Dad went down and he dug a new cesspool. Now his problem was that he dug the new cesspool too close to the old one, and the wall of dirt between the two collapsed on him. He never complained. He just got out and just washed himself off. And as a result, we had a bigger cesspool. Even after we left the farm, he devoted every weekend to doing whatever chores needed to be done around the house, no matter how difficult, no matter how dirty, that was the kind of work he did. You noticed that nobody was competing with him to do the work. There was a wide open field.

I discovered when I went to Thailand, that that attitude was perfect for a living in a Thai monastery, especially in Rayong, where sometimes we had only two or three monks, one or two lay people, and there was a whole monastery to look after. On the one hand, Ajaan Fuang kept saying that the internal monastery—he was playing with the words. In Thai, there is the word *wat* which means monastery, but *wat* also means your daily duties, your daily practice. So he said, first look after your internal *wat*—your practice of meditation—and then the external *wat* comes after.

So on the one hand, we want to make sure that our own internal practice is what stays at the center of everything here, but there are times when you really have to give a lot of effort to the external *wat*. Figure out what needs to be done, what doesn't need to be done, especially like periods right now where we're down to a very few people. Look around you and see what needs to be done. If it's too much to do every single thing, well figure out what needs to be done today and what can be put off tomorrow. Learn how to read the situation. It's like being a member of that Thai orchestra. Just listen to who is missing.

Or like Korean classical music. I was a drummer once for a *kaeyegum* player, and being a drummer wasn't just a matter of keeping the beat. You had to vary how many extra strokes you

put, say, in a particular bar. Some beats sounded best if you syncopated them and didn't hit the drum, other beats sounded better when you did. But what was really important was the kaeyegum had its very set tune, and there were parts where on the downbeat the kaeyegum wouldn't play. That's where I was told the drummer always had to play. You never wanted an empty downbeat. So there are times when the kaeyegum was playing on the downbeat, and it wasn't necessary to hit the drum. You could vary the rhythm, and it sounded better when you played that way.

The same principle applies here. Look around and see what needs to be done. Who is missing the downbeat? Be alive to the fact that some people have regular jobs. We've informally divided the jobs up among ourselves, who does what. Sometimes some people have a heavier job than normal. They might appreciate a helping hand.

So life in the monastery is like improv. Improv requires you to be very alert, which of course is an excellent practice for the meditation. Learn how to read the situation around you, and it helps in your skill in reading the situation inside.

Because the same principle happens in the mind. Defilements in your mind don't come in line with any score. They come willy-nilly. Some days there are a lot; some days there are not that many. You have to be up for whatever the situation requires. This is what right effort is all about. Some issues come up in the mind that require a lot of effort and a lot of thought. Others require just that you watch, and they go away on their own. So you have to learn a sensitivity to what needs to be done inside. Remember that the practice of meditation is not a military exercise or a mechanical exercise. It's improv. So the two skills should help each other along—learning how to improvise inside, and learning how to improvise outside. That's what leads to harmony.

Always keep the principle of harmony in mind.