A Sense of Time & Place

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One of the sad things that happens over time with the teachings of the ajahns is that each ajahn’s teachings get reduced to a slogan. Ajahn Chah, they say, is all about “let go, let go.” Ajahn Mahabhu is all about fighting defilements. Ajahn Lee is all about breath. That’s not the case. Their teachings are a lot more varied and subtle than that. And it’s an important point to keep in mind, that you don’t want to reduce everything to a slogan. Their teachings are useful for some times, but not for others. And when you’re reading a particular dhamma talk, say, or listening to one, you have to remember that the teacher is speaking to a particular audience with a particular set of problems and may or may not be in line with the problems you’re having right now. So with many teachings, there’s a time and a place. And then there’s also a time and a place for the opposite teaching. Take, for example, the Buddhist teachings on self. The kind of thinking that defines who you are can get you into a lot of trouble. When he talks about papanca, the kind of thinking that creates conflict, it starts with the thought, “I am the thinker.” And from that self-definition, you go on to create a lot of trouble for yourself and other people. Not only do you create conflict, but you also limit yourself. When you define yourself, “I’m like this,” “I’m like that,” and whatever identity you take on, then you have to feed that identity. And that’s what gets you into conflict with other people. And, of course, in taking on that identity, you’re limited to a certain kind of food. Like pandas, they can eat only a certain kind of bamboo leaf. And when the food is not enough, it gets used up. That’s it. Each of your identities has a very limited range of food. And there’ll be other beings that are going to fight you for that food as well. This is why identifying yourself like that leads to conflict. There’s that image where the Buddha talks about before he gained awakening, as he was beginning to practice, he looked at the world, and it was like a crowd of fish fighting one another over water in a river that was just drying up, drying up, drying up. They’re all going to die. But in the meantime, before they die, they have to fight one another to get that little bit of water before it goes. And then, of course, that’s it. They all die. He gave rise to a great feeling of sanghvega. Then he said he looked and he realized that there was a problem with not being out there and somehow trying to find enough water for everybody. After all, he said, even if it rained gold coins, we wouldn’t have enough for everybody’s desires. The solution lay in learning how not to be a fish who has to eat water or live with water. So an important part of the meditation is learning how not to be a fish who has to eat gold coins, to identify yourself, and not limiting yourself to a particular identity, and trying to avoid the conflicts that come from that. But the Buddha does also, at other times, say it’s important that you have a sense of yourself, attanjuh, it’s called, knowing where your strengths are and where your weaknesses are. So this means, on the one hand, if you find yourself wondering if you have it for the practice, or you have the talent or the ability or just the stamina or whatever it takes, that kind of thinking limits you. But if you see that you have certain weaknesses, then the next step is to work on those. Where are you weak? Where are you strong? Focus on your strengths to overcome your weaknesses. That’s a useful kind of thinking. The first kind of thinking is limited to a fixed identity. The second kind is seeing yourself more as a work-in-progress. And not all work-in-progress kind of thinking is going to be useful. But if you can use it to focus on where your problems are, what strengths you have to draw on, that can be a useful kind of thinking. So thinking about who you are, where you are, what your strengths and weaknesses are, that can be a useful line of thinking. So there’s a time when you want to really look carefully at yourself, and other times when you don’t want to be too bound by your sense of self. Learn to have a time and place. When thinking about self is useful and when it’s not. A similar principle applies to the whole issue of when you’re sitting here meditating, to what extent do you want to be proactive in getting rid of the defilements, and what times do you want to be very quiet and just watch? There’s going to be a time for each. Sometimes the technique of actively getting rid of the defilements means first that you’ve got to watch them to understand what’s happening, what they’re doing. It’s like being a naturalist out in the woods. If you want to observe an animal, you don’t go running at the animal. The animal will run away. You have to hide and be very quiet and pretend like you’re not even watching the animal. There’s a lot of animals, if they sense a pair of eyes on them immediately, they’ll get spooked and run away. So you have to be very indirect in the way you watch them. But it’s not because you’re not going to do anything with the knowledge. You want to use that knowledge to understand the animal. And in the case of your defilements, you want to put an end to them. You want to figure out the animal so you can catch them. And as for skillful qualities, you want to watch them for a while so you can figure out how you can encourage them. Again, if you’re too direct in trying to hold onto them, that sometimes scares them away. After all, we’re sitting here watching the breath, not because the breath is the goal of the practice. We’re here to watch the mind. But you’ve got to start by watching the breath. And then you catch the mind in the act of watching the breath. And that’s how you observe it. It’s an indirect kind of observation. So realize that we’re working on a skill here, and the skill has many dimensions. And if you take one doctrinaire attitude and apply it, you can mess yourself up. I was reading about subsistence farmers up in Alaska, and they said the people who scare them the most are the ones who come with very doctrinaire ideas about how they’re going to live off the woods and not going to use any technology that you wouldn’t have found a hundred years ago. And they end up causing themselves a lot of trouble, because there are some things that have been invented in the last hundred years that are useful. You have to have a very pragmatic approach. Use what works. It’s the same with meditation. Sometimes you have to be very proactive and really work with the breath. And other times you have to simply watch it. Sometimes you have to work with your mind. And then a skillful attitude comes up and you’ve got to argue with it. Other times, if you argue with it, it just goes and hides. And then it waits until you’re not paying attention, and then it’ll sneak out again. Those are the cases where you have to be indirect, too. This comes under another principle called galan yatha, having a sense of the right time. And unfortunately there are no quick and easy formulas. For one to be more proactive and one to be more quiet and observant, you’ve got to learn from trial and error. But realize that there is this range of approaches you can take. And if things aren’t working well, step back and ask yourself, “Okay, what are the other approaches you might take? What are the other alternatives?” Remember that sometimes the quickest way to get somewhere is not the direct route, it’s the indirect route. When you keep this range of alternatives in mind, you find that you have a lot more possibilities open to you. And the question of whether you have it to succeed in the practice is something that you answer by whether you have it or not. You’re going to create it. You can give rise to it. After all, this is a truth of the will. Some truths are truths that are available to any observer. All you have to do is just watch very quietly and the truth will come to you. You want to learn about stars. You want to learn about the laws of physics. You have to observe very carefully, and you can’t let your desires for whether things are going to be this way or that way get in the way. Both truths of the will. You have to want very much for this to happen. You’re going to be a good musician. You have to want to be a good musician. You’re going to be a good meditator. You have to want it. And fortunately that desire is something that you can create. You can generate it. You’re looking at the benefits that come from mastering the skill, and looking at the dangers that come from not. And putting in enough time so that you start getting familiar with what works and what doesn’t work, so it becomes less and less foreign territory and more and more your own practice. We’re here to make the Dhamma our own. And a lot of times that means changing who we are. But fortunately you’re not stuck with any set of skills and you’re not stuck with an identity. These things are a lot more open to choice than you might think.

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