Words of Encouragement

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When you read the stories of the Great Ajahns, sometimes it can get discouraging. The way they’re written makes it sound like they came out of the womb determined to become arahants and that their lives never deviated from that intention and they never really had any great problems. Which is not the case. There’s the story of Ajahn Kaha, who was married. His wife cheated on him. He was planning to murder either his wife or the guy, or both. He came to his senses and he realized, “How much longer am I going to suffer if I keep this up?” That’s why he ordained. There’s the story of Ajahn Chah, who complained that he had lots and lots of trouble getting his mind to settle down and be quiet. Ajahn Suat tells an interesting story. When he was a young monk studying with Ajahn Phan, his teacher, Ajahn Phan kept saying, “You really ought to go spend some time with Ajahn Mun.” So after a year or so, Ajahn Suat went and spent some time with Ajahn Mun. One day, Ajahn Mun asked him, “How’s your meditation going?” And when Ajahn asked you a question like that, you’d like to report that you’re doing it well. But all Ajahn Suat could say was, “I’m just sitting here watching my mind being distracted all the time.” Then Ajahn Mun said, “Well, at least you know you’re being distracted. That’s part of the practice of establishing mindfulness, knowing the distracted mind as a distracted mind.” Then Ajahn Suat took that very well. He realized, on the one hand, that it wasn’t a really great practice. Ajahn Mun wasn’t telling him that it was good enough the way it was. But he was reminding him that, okay, you’re better off than when you’re not meditating, even if things are not going well. At least you’re alert to what’s happening in the mind. Then Ajahn Mun was giving him encouragement. The picture of Ajahn Mun that often comes out of the biographies is that he was always very fierce and very harsh, which is not the case. He’d be very gentle and very encouraging. After all, he was dealing with people who were told by the rest of the society that they were pretty hopeless. Born into peasant families, what hope did they have of gaining anything special? But he reminded them, “You’ve got all you need for the practice. You’ve got the body, you’ve got the mind. You’re not crazy. You’re here with time to practice. That’s everything you need. And whether it goes well quickly, or it goes well slowly, the fact that you’re on the path is what gives you hope. If you give up, get discouraged, if the voices in your mind keep telling you you’re hopeless, you’re bad, you’re never going to come to any good. If you listen to those voices, it’ll be a self-fulfilling prophecy. They just want to get you off the path. So there are two ways of dealing with it. One is to encourage the more positive voices, to remind yourself that,”Yes, at least I’m doing something good here. I’m not harming anyone. I’m able to watch my mind. Whether it’s going fast or slowly, at least it’s going in place. It’s headed in the right direction.” And you have to question the harsh voices, the skeptical voices, the mean voices inside. Why should you believe them? Part of you may say, “Well, they’ve been right sometimes that I tried to do something and I didn’t do it well.” But how are you going to do things well if you listen to those voices? You don’t know where you pick them up, and you don’t know what motivations they’re masks for. But nobody ever gained anything in the practice by listening to the voices of skepticism. There are different kinds of doubts. There’s the doubt that, “How is this done?” And the only way you’re going to overcome that doubt is by giving it a try. There’s the doubt in your ability to ever do anything well. That’s destructive, and that’s not worth following at all. So it’s good to remember that other people who’ve been on the path have had problems, too. We are trying to focus on the breath. Sometimes you wonder, “Where is the breath? What is this breath? You look and look and look and can’t find anything.” Or there are times when you work with the breath and it just seems to get worse. So what do you do? You back off a bit and say, “Whether I focus on the breath or not, the breath is going to come in and go out on its own. So let’s let it come in and go out on its own without my getting involved.” This practice of stepping back from something you’ve been engaged in. It’s really, really important. It’s like the first step they teach in Thai boxing, which is not to hit somebody but to back away, to get out of the clinch. So at the very least you get yourself out of danger. Well, you practice the same thing in the meditation. When the mind gets in a negative spiral, you back out. The spiral may keep on going for a while, but at least you’re not sliding down the luge. You’re staying right here and watching. And it’s in the watching that you can see things you may not have seen before. Because all of this is to help the mind see itself more clearly. And there are times when what you see more clearly is the negative side. And you have to learn how to be okay with that for the purpose of getting beyond it. If you can’t admit that there’s a lot of negativity in your mind or that there are a lot of weaknesses in the mind, you’re never going to be able to deal with them. But you learn how to admit that and do what you can. You don’t let that realization of weakness put a stop to things. Because the mind is an active process. And there’s nothing about you that’s fixed. The Buddha says, “If you try to define yourself, you limit yourself. And if you define yourself as good or bad, you get stuck with that.” If you define yourself as already good, there’s nothing you can do to practice. If you define yourself as already bad, there’s nothing you can do. Just realize there are lots of potentials in the mind, and they’re constantly changing, constantly growing, constantly developing. The question he has you ask is, “Days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I becoming? What’s the general direction here?” And as long as you’re not heading off into something really bad, you’re doing okay. Even just holding still is better than slipping off into something that’s a lot worse. So learn how to give yourself encouragement, like Ajahn Mun teaching Ajahn Suwat. That’s the duty of your inner teacher—to warn you when you’re getting off the path, but at the same time to give you enough encouragement to keep you going. And if your inner teacher is lacking one of these two qualities, okay, the inner teacher needs to be trained. But that’s the nature of the mind. It can change. It can develop. Get it headed in the right direction and keep it going. That’s our only way out of here.

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