Remembering Ajaan Lee (outdoors)

April 24, 2022

Today we’re commemorating the passing of Ajahn Lee, my teacher’s teacher. He died on April 26, 1961, more than 60 years ago. We’re fortunate that we have his books, because unlike the other Ajahns in the forest tradition, his books are not just recorded or transcribed Dhamma talks. He actually intended them to be basic texts, you might call them, dealing with the basic principles of the practice, setting them out in a way that would be appropriate for everyone. The Dhamma talks, usually the talk is aimed at the audience, their particular needs, their particular level of understanding. But with these books on basic principles, they’re meant to be appropriate for everyone. One of the basic principles that Ajahn Lee taught was the need to use your discernment to get the mind to settle down. He stated in one of his earlier books that this was the principle that he had learned to use. But then Ajahn Lee went into a lot more detail about what was involved. He was involved both in mindfulness practice and in concentration practice. And basically he said that the two practices were not different. You go to some places and they say you’re either doing mindfulness or you’re doing concentration. You can’t do the two at the same time, because the way they teach mindfulness, you just are aware of whatever comes up and don’t react, whereas with concentration you’re trying to make the mind do something. But if you look at how the Buddha defined mindfulness, he didn’t define it that way. He defined it as a function of your memory. You’re going to remember what you’re going to do, and you have an agenda. The basic formula is that you stay focused, say, on the body in and of itself, or feelings in and of themselves, or the mind in and of itself. You have the body, feelings, or mind, as you experience them directly right here, right now. And you really try to maintain that focus. If anything comes up, you don’t follow the other things. That’s the other half of the instruction. Any thoughts that have to do with the world, you put them aside. You’re here with the body on its own terms. And then you bring three qualities to bear. Mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. Alertness, your ability to watch what you’re doing. And then ardency, your desire to do this well. Of those three qualities, as John Lee points out, the ardency is where the discernment lies. Because mindfulness can be keeping anything in mind. It still counts as mindfulness. Alertness, you can be alert to anything happening in the present moment. You can be alert to the sound of the planes, the sound of the wind going through the leaves, the sound of the crows. A lot of that would not help you settle down. It wouldn’t do much for you to gain insight into your mind. It’s your ardency that tells you, okay, you’ve got to watch what you are doing. When you make up your mind to stay with the breath, there’s an intention. And you have to remember that intention and keep agreeing with it each time. You breathe in, each time you breathe out. And it helps if you can make this comfortable. This is where the practice turns into concentration practice. And the terminology is different, but it’s not all that different in terms of the meaning. It’s what’s called directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts. In other words, you keep one topic in mind. Which is the breath. And then you evaluate it. What kind of breathing would feel good right now? You can try long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light. Or in long, out short, if you need more energy. In short, out long, if you need to relax. Try not to squeeze the breath as it goes out. Because you’ll notice that your in and out breath is related to the energy throughout the body. If you get really sensitive, you see energy flows through the blood vessels, through the nerves. And you want all those energies to connect up. So there’s no tension, there’s no walls, no barriers inside the body. The whole body seems to be breathing together. And doing all that, getting the breath comfortable, learning how to maintain that sense of comfort, and then allowing it to spread. That’s all the work of evaluation. That’s how you use your discernment to get the mind to settle down. You realize that if you just try to force it to settle down, it’s not going to stay. It’s like taking one of those inflated balls they have at swimming pools and trying to keep it underwater. As long as your grip is good, you can keep it underwater. But as soon as your grip slips, it’s going to come shooting up into the air. Same way with the mind. If it’s not with a sense of comfort, a sense of ease, filling the whole body, it’s going to want to go looking for other places for its comfort, other places for its well-being. So use your discernment to bring it here. Now, John Fuehring’s image is of catching eels. So if you just jump down into the mud and try to catch the eels, they’ll go swimming off every which way. You have to find something that the eels like. He says if you find the carcass of a dead dog, you stick it in a jar and put that down in the mud, and the eels will all come. It may not be a pretty image, but it gives you the idea. You’re trying to find something that the mind likes, to want to stay. And that’s how you use your discernment to get the mind to settle down. So this means that thinking is not always an enemy to stillness. If you use your thinking right, if you use your discernment right, you can get the mind to be willing to settle down. The mind fits with the breath, the breath fits with the mind. And your meditation becomes a skill. And John Lee’s emphasis on meditation, on ardency and evaluation here, falls in line with this series of images that he likes to use when he explains the practice. He says it’s like developing a manual skill. The teacher will teach you how to sew a pair of pants, how to weave a basket, how to make clay tiles. But then when you try it, they don’t come out like the teacher’s. The teacher will explain, to some extent, what you did wrong. But you’ve got to start using your own powers of observation. What did you do, and what happened as a result? What could you change to see if you get better results? You keep trying and trying and trying and judging the results, and if they’re not good enough, you keep trying again. You don’t give up. You develop your own powers of observation. You develop your ingenuity. That’s how you’re going to get results. As the Buddha said, it’s through commitment and reflection that we learn the Dhamma. In other words, we try to do our best, and when we realize it’s not good enough, we reflect on it. What can I do better? What can I change? In this way, you develop your own independent powers of observation. In which case, your discernment becomes your discernment. Because you see for yourself. This is another theme that Ajaan Lee likes. You practice to the point where you become independent in the Buddhist teachings. We’re not just here to obey orders and not question. We have to learn how to question things in the right way so that we become more and more reliable as observers, more ingenious in trying to figure out how to master these skills. It’s by being observant and ingenious that your discernment develops, and it’s going to be your independent discernment. So when the results come, you’re not just simply saying, “Okay, these are the results the Buddha said I was going to get, so I have to be satisfied with them.” When the real results come, your powers of observation have been developed to the point where you realize, “Okay, these things really are amazing, these results. These really are worth all the effort that went into it.” It’s your own independent judgment at that point. So this is one of the reasons why we bow down to the Buddha, because he doesn’t want to keep us in a position of slavery or dependence all the time. He wants to teach us to be independent. Which means that it’s up to us to want that independence as well.

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