The Meditator as Warrior

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One of the qualities of Ajahn Phuong that struck me over the years was his resilience, his ability to put up with lots of different difficulties. So part of that resilience was endurance, and part of it was resourcefulness. He didn’t just put up with things. He kept finding ways to solve problems. He wouldn’t let himself be defeated. If one way of approaching a problem didn’t work, he would try another, and if that didn’t work, he’d try another. Just keep at it. Ajahn Lee describes his qualities in his Instructions on Breath Meditation. He talks about how Breath Meditation fulfills the different factors in the Eightfold Noble Path. And for a right effort, that’s how he defines it. Something’s wrong with the breath, something’s wrong with the mind. You keep trying to find a solution. So it’s determination, resilience, endurance, ingenuity. These qualities all go together. They’re qualities you want to develop as a meditator. As you notice, there are also qualities of a soldier in battle. And this is an image you see both in the Canon and in the teachings of the Forest of John’s, that we’re here to do battle with our defilements. And it’s an inner battle, of course. You’re doing battle with things that you’ve identified with in the past, which makes it a difficult battle, because those lines are not easily drawn. Think back in the World War II. They would have maps that would show where the front lines were. But then we have wars nowadays where there are no front lines. That’s the way it is inside. It’s hard to pinpoint exactly where one defilement begins and where its antidote ends. What attitude or what voice in the mind may seem to be on the side of the Dhamma, in some instances, turns around. So the mind is a tricky character. Your defilements are tricky characters. Which is why an attitude of skepticism is important. This too is one of Ajahn Fung’s attributes. We tend to think of highly advanced people as being warm and loving and totally accepting. But there’s something inside of Ajahn Fung that was always standing apart, watching, observing. That too is a quality you want to develop as a meditator. In the beginning it’s simply a factor of alertness. You’re trying to get the mind to settle down. That’s one of those cases where the battle lines are pretty easily drawn. And you’re thinking that what pulls you away from the breath is part of the enemy. And you’re thinking that gets you more involved in the breath, more settled in the breath, more aware of what’s going on with the breathing. That kind of thinking is on your side. As the Buddha says, the definition of Right Mindfulness basically has two activities. One is to keep track of something in and of itself, like the breath in and of itself. And then you’re putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. So you’re trying to protect your awareness of the breath as you fend off all the thoughts that would pull you out, getting you thinking about the situation in the world outside, whether it’s the world of politics, the world of the climate, anything that’s not related to your immediate experience of the breath right now. So watch out for the mind. It’s going to slip out. And you don’t want to slip with it. It’s going to be one of the important insights you gain as you’re trying to get the mind into concentration, that thoughts can go, but you don’t have to go along with the thoughts. They’re like little worlds. As John Sowood described them, he called them the places where the mind travels, or the means by which it travels. Those are bhava, becomeings. And all too often they form and we’re inside them. So when they float away, we float away with them. But you’ve got to learn how to step out of them. Stay with the breath. And if you can see them going, let them go. You don’t have to follow them. You don’t have to do anything with them, because they’ll pop on their own. But you do have to have a clear sense that you don’t want to go with them. You want to establish yourself right here. This relates to another set of qualities, the ones that the Buddha talked about. After he gained his awakening, he didn’t claim that he had special qualities that had been given to him by God, or that he had special qualities that nobody else could have. He said these things appeared to him as would happen in anyone who is heedful, ardent, resolute. Heedful, of course, means seeing danger, but realizing that dangers can be evaded if you’re careful, if you’re vigilant. Ardent means you put your whole heart in wanting to do this well. As for resolute, the Pali word for resolute literally means striven-minded, or striving-minded. Now there’s really put effort into this. And the effort is there in the mind. In Thailand, where they like to talk about meditation as doing effort, doing an effort, temkuampian. And a lot of people think, well, it means sitting long periods of time and doing long periods of walking meditation. And it’s good that you try those out every now and then to see how far you can push yourself, until you realize you push yourself too much. But the real effort is in the mind, to sort things out inside. And to be able to step back from your thoughts, view them with a little skepticism, so you’re not easily taken in. And learning how to be resourceful, to deal with whatever problems come up. So those are the qualities you want to develop as you meditate, the attitudes you want to bring. You’re here in a battle. You’re sorting out which of the voices inside the mind really are your friends, which ones you’ve got to get out of the mind, or at least make sure they don’t take over. In Jnana Mahaprabhu, his image is getting up in a boxing ring and just going to defeat the opponent. And of course in the beginning you’re going to lose. But it’s better that you fight and lose than you don’t fight at all. Just giving in, accepting whatever comes. That’s not fighting. You’ve got to resist some of the movements in the mind, and encourage other movements that are more healthy, more skillful. In John Lee’s image is that you’re in battle, and you want to learn how to convert your enemy. In other words, you’re going to be doing battle with your desires, but you’re going to need to use desire as part of your path. This is what’s made clear in that image of the Brahmin who comes to see Venerable Ananda and asks him, “What is the goal of this practice?” Ananda said, “One of the goals is the ending of desire.” How do you get there? Ananda described the four bases for success, beginning with the basis of success based on desire, and the Brahmin said, “Well, that’s impossible. How can you get rid of desire? By using desire.” So Ananda turned the tables on the Brahmin. He said, “Before you came here to this park, did you have the desire to come?” “Well, yes.” “Without that desire would you have come here?” “No.” “So you acted on the desire. You’ve come here, where’s the desire now?” “Well, it’s gone because I’m here.” “That’s the way it is for the path. We need desire to get to where we want to go.” “And then we can put it aside.” So you learn how to convert your desires so that they are helpful in the path. If you tried to practice without desire, nothing would happen. Nothing would be accomplished. You’d just slide back into your old ways. But as you adopt your desires, you do have to be careful with them, because you can’t side with them all the time. There will come a point where you do have to let them go, too. So either way you’re in a battle, and it depends on your strategy, as to whether you have to knock out the enemy or whether you have to convert the enemy. But just that ability to see that a lot of your old ways are your enemies. Think about the Buddha on the night of his awakening. He was finally able to get the mindful point that was not affected by any of his past karma at all. In his experience of the deathless, he was totally free from all past conditioning. So he comes back to the world of the senses with a totally different perspective. He’s coming from a non-conditioned place. That’s how he’s able to sort out which aspects of Indian culture from his time were still useful, and which ones were not. That’s the ultimate stepping out. And we get there by learning how to step out with that attitude of a little bit of skepticism for all the desires coming up in the mind. How they present themselves as your friends, how they present themselves as your followers. You can’t trust them all. So try to have this quality of endurance, resilience, this ability to step out and question things, and to be resourceful in coming up with answers. These are the qualities you want to bring to your practice. So there really does make a difference inside.

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