The Right Qualities

April 26, 2020

Here it is, 59 years since Ajahn Lee passed away. It’s useful to think about how he taught meditation. We know that the main topic that he taught was the breath, but there was a way of analyzing the concentration that he used often, which was to divide it into three things. You start out, he said, with the right intention. Here, the intention is to train the mind, because we realize that we can create a lot of suffering with an untrained mind. We act on our impulses, we act on our likes and dislikes, without thinking about where they’re going. It’s the untrained mind that pays no attention to learning, the long-term consequences, and looks for immediate reactions, immediate impulses. Its main voice is, “I want to do this,” and it doesn’t really care about the consequences. So the first intention is to care about the consequences, to realize that, for the sake of our long-term happiness, we really do need to train the mind. This will be good for us and good for the people around us. So that’s the right intention. The second factor is the right object. In this case, it’s the breath. That’s your home base, he said, although there are other objects you can focus on as you go foraging out from your home base. In other words, when lust comes up, sometimes you have to drop the breath and focus on the thirty-two parts of the body, any contemplation to get around the lust. If anger comes up, you focus on goodwill, you focus on equanimity, and then get back to the breath. In other words, you use the topic that is right for the problem in the mind. That home base is the breath. Of all the meditation topics, it’s by far the safest. Think of the Buddhist comment that when you focus on other topics in meditation, sometimes unskillful states can arise. So you go back to the breath, follow the steps for breathing with the whole body, calming the breath, breathing with a sense of rapture, with a sense of pleasure, seeing clearly into how the mind fabricates its different states, how the breath is useful in fabricating different states in the mind. That washes those unskillful qualities out of the mind in the same way that the first rains of the rainy season washes all the dust out of the air. So the breath is home base. It’s the right object. Then finally, as Ajahn Lee said, you need the right qualities. This applies both to the breath and to the mind. The right qualities in the breath are a sense of ease, a sense of fullness. In other words, you’re trying to give rise to a sense of well-being inside so the mind has a good place to stay. I know some people in the forest traditions, most people who don’t really know much about Ajahn Lee, accuse him of getting people stuck on pleasure. But, as he said, if you’re not stuck on this kind of pleasure, what kind of pleasures are you going to be stuck on? You’re going to be stuck on your old sensual pleasures, getting stuck on concentration, which is something that you can solve a lot more easily than being stuck on sensuality. The mind needs its nourishment. The sense of pleasure, the sense of fullness that comes as you work with the breath and to get the right quality in the breath, really are food, nourishment for the mind. The mind doesn’t have this nourishment. It’s going to go looking for its food in all the wrong places. So that’s getting the right quality with the breath. At the same time, you want the right qualities in the mind. Ajahn Lee has lots of different qualities he talks about in this context, sometimes simply mindfulness and alertness. But one of the sets that he liked to talk about most was the four bases for success. It’s a set of dhammas that’s especially useful here in the West because we have so many of them. There’s no such thing as a successful or unsuccessful meditation, a good or bad meditation. All meditation is just meditation. There’s nothing to do, no skills to develop. But that’s not how the Buddha taught, and certainly not how you’re going to get the best results out of the meditation. You have to take a mature attitude toward your meditation that this is a goal, or this is a path, at least a goal. It’s going to take a lot of work. It’s going to take time, but you’re willing to put in the time. And you have the resources for keeping yourself on the path. The first of these resources is desire. The desire not only to get results out of the path, but also to do whatever is required to get those results. So you focus your desire on the causes. This is the beginning of right effort, generating desire. If it’s not there, you learn how to give rise to it. Talk to yourself in a way that makes you want to do the meditation. The next step is persistence. Here again, this is a factor in right effort. You arouse persistence. You do what you can to energize yourself, to convince yourself that, yes, you do have it within you to do this. You can find the sources for energy inside. All too often when we’re getting sleepy, we focus on the signs of sleepiness in the body, because the mind is already inclined in that direction and wants to go there. But if you have the desire that you really do want to practice, you have to learn that there are parts of the body that are not exhibiting signs of drowsiness, and you want to focus there. Make the most of them. Arouse them. That’s the second factor for success, or the base for success. Then the third is intent, which you really give yourself over to paying careful attention to what you’re doing. This is where mindfulness and alertness come in. You’ve got those three qualities. With the desire and the persistence, you’ve got the ardency. And then with the intentness, you’re mindful and alert. You’re watching what you’re doing, looking at the results. You’re remembering what’s worked in the past and what hasn’t worked in the past. You’re remembering to stay here, how to stay here, and giving this your full attention. The fourth base for success, vimamsa and pali, is translated in lots of different ways. The John Lee’s favorite translation was circumspection. In other words, you look carefully at what you’re doing in the present moment. You look at the results you’re getting, and you pass judgment on what you’ve done. Is this good enough? And you want to hold yourself to a high standard. You don’t want to simply do just enough to get by, because getting by is not all that desirable and a path to follow. It doesn’t lead anywhere special. And you have to remember, this is a path that leads to seeing what you’ve never seen before, attaining what you’ve never attained before. It’s going to require doing a lot of things you’ve never done before. But it’s not a path where it’s just enough to get by. You want to hold yourself to a high standard. That’s the kind of quality you want to develop. The circumspection allows for that. You’re looking all around when you’re passing judgment. Think of the Buddha’s instructions to Mahapajapati. The Dhamma is good, both in terms of the qualities you develop, in terms of your impact on the people around you, and on the internal goal. The internal freedom that you attain. If the mind isn’t yet free, it means there’s work to be done. And so you look all around at your way of doing that work. What is your impact on other people? What is your impact on the mind as you practice? Is the mind getting free from a lot of things that used to tie it down? Is it getting free from its impulses? Is it free from its shortcomings? Is it free from short-sighted likes and dislikes? Hold yourself to a high standard. This is how you get the right quality in your meditation. So these are the three factors to keep in mind. The right intention, the right object, and the right quality, both in body and mind. These are the qualities that make it inspiring. So practice in a way that you find your own mind inspiring. You’re not doing this to get praised by other people. That’s one of the reasons why, in the forest tradition, the Ajahns don’t praise the students. The students shouldn’t be there for getting praise. They should be there for working on their own practice. The powers of judgment are raising their standards. So when the results come, it’s not just for the sake of pleasing somebody. You like them, you appreciate them, because they really are satisfactory. That sense of satisfaction goes deep into the mind, deep into the heart. That’s when you know that you’ve got these three factors of the meditation all working together and showing what they’re really capable of.

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