The Joy of Persistence

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In his later years, John Fung very rarely accepted invitations to chant at people’s houses. Then students finally figured out that if they wanted to invite him for a meal, they’d ask him to converse about the Dhamma. That kind of invitation he would accept. There was one time when I went along, and the sister of the woman who was sponsoring the meal happened to be there. She was meditating with another Ajahn, who was not a member of the forest tradition, after the meal. She said, “Meditation is all about emptying your mind, right?” And he said, “No. You have to give the mind work to do. Otherwise anything will come in, just as if you leave the door to your house open. Anybody can come in, even dogs and cats and other animals can come in.” Now, for those of us who come to meditation looking for some relaxation, we don’t like to hear the idea that there’s work involved. But it’s very much the case. The word kamatthana means “the place of work.” That’s the name of our tradition. And one of its idioms for practicing is tam kvampiyen, which is “to make an effort.” But it’s not all grim. As Ajahn Fuang himself said, you want to play with the breath, play with the meditation. In other words, find some enjoyment in what you’re doing. You’re not here just to rest, but you can find enjoyment in mastering a skill and approaching the meditation as a process of exploration. It’s like learning a musical instrument. It is possible to hire a teacher to stand over you. Back in the old days, they’d have a little stick, and if you played something wrong, they’d hit your hands. Very quickly you learn to hate music. But if you experiment on your own, try different notes, try different chords, try different melodies, listen to other people play, come back and try to reproduce what you’ve heard, figure out what’s wrong. The fact that you’re exploring on your own makes it enjoyable, and the fact that you’re learning makes it enjoyable. So look for the joy in your effort, the joy in your persistence. A lot of this has to do with how you talk to yourself. You can come up here for the hour and tell yourself, “Oh my gosh, another hour of meditation.” Or you can say, “Here’s my opportunity.” The world has lots of cares, lots of responsibilities, but right now I don’t have any cares or responsibilities. I can just be with my breath right here. I can be with my mind right here. Get to know my mind. Use the breath as a mirror for the mind. This is called generating desire, and it’s part of right effort. It’s largely how you talk to yourself. A lot of us need practice in how to talk to ourselves skillfully. This is a lot of what the practice of generosity and virtue is all about. I’ve told you that story about Ajahn Sawat when we taught in Massachusetts. After the second or third day, he looked out across the Westerners sitting there meditating, and everybody looked very grim. And Ajahn Sawat commented on that. He said, “See how grim they are? It’s because they don’t have any background in generosity and virtue.” And part of that, of course, is that it’s a matter of trusting the Buddha. You’re learning to do some things that are counterintuitive. You’re going to find happiness in giving things away. You’re going to find happiness in not doing some of the things you want to do. But out of confidence in the Buddha, you give it a try, and you find that you really do have more self-esteem. There’s a greater sense of well-being inside. There’s a greater sense of satisfaction in seeing that you’ve pleased somebody when you give them a gift. There’s a greater sense of satisfaction when you look at your actions and you can tell yourself, “Well, I didn’t stoop to x, no matter how much anybody tried to give me to do it.” Then you realize that’s a higher level of pleasure. If you come with that background, then you look at the idea of sitting and meditating in one posture for an hour with your eyes closed, which may not seem appealing, but you give it a try. Because you have confidence in the Buddha that you’ve gained from the practice so far, you find it a lot easier to put up with the difficulties. That’s part of the issue. The other part, as I said, is knowing how to talk to yourself. In the practice of generosity, you’ve got to talk to yourself so you can enjoy it. It’s the same with the precepts. It’s how you talk to yourself when you hold yourself back from doing something that makes all the difference. Listen to the mind’s chatter and ask yourself, “Is it helpful right now, or is it getting in the way?” And if it’s getting in the way, how can I change the course of the conversation? Because, after all, the chatter, directed thought and evaluation, is going to be part of your concentration practice. And if your directed thoughts are directed to what a miserable meditator you are, and that’s not going to help at all, that’s going to pull you out of concentration. You want to direct your thoughts to the object, and to how much you’re going to enjoy this, and how much you’re willing to experiment. And if things don’t go well, talk to yourself again. Say, “Well, I learned something from that.” You can try certain times of breathing and you find that they give rise to headaches. Just chalk that up to experience. Certain places where you focus on the body you find you fall asleep. Chalk that up to experience. In other words, regard each meditation as a learning opportunity. Even on the days when it doesn’t go well, you’re learning something. But it’s a matter of how you talk to yourself. What’s your focus on? How you evaluate what’s going on. How you evaluate your inner conversation. If it’s not going well, be gentle but firm. Direct the conversation to another topic. Like the fact that even though the last breath was pretty constricted, that doesn’t mean every breath is going to have to be that way. You’ve got a new breath, and then a new breath, and a new one. They keep coming. All these opportunities to stay focused on the breath and to explore how it feels. That word “explore” is an important part of making it enjoyable. It’s like learning a new language. You simply go through exercises that have the right answers at the back of the book. It’s no fun. But if you’re reading a book in a new language and you come across a new word and you figure out what it means, or if it’s a word you’ve known before but you realize it has a new meaning in this context and you’ve learned that on your own, that makes the new language your own. It’s the same with meditation. The more you explore here, it’s your breath, it’s your mind. You’re here to make the meditation your own by finding things out. So this is how you generate desire, realizing that you’re here to explore. And giving yourself encouragement so you appreciate the opportunity and see every meditation as a learning opportunity. That way the mind both has work to do and it plays at the same time. The best kind of work, the best kind of play. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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