Better than Good Enough

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It’s good to think about the Buddha and his quest for awakening, what drove that quest. And Chan Mun’s way of expressing it was the desire not to come back and be the laughingstock in the defilements ever again. In other words, your greed, your aversion, your delusion, and all of their many forms, have fooled you for a long, long time. And there should come a point where you’ve decided you’ve had enough. This is what drove Ajahn Ma himself. And you can imagine the Buddha had the same attitude. Here he was oppressing a member of a very wealthy family with a lot of power, and looked pretty clear that the power was going to come to him someday. And he decided it wasn’t good enough. One of those cases with the family was probably very perplexed. Where did this come from? They hadn’t raised him to be that sort of person. But that’s the sort of person he was. So you think about that, and then you look at the way you meditate. How can you inspire that same determination in yourself? We’re not here just to get by with “This is good enough to get by.” We’re here to do something better, because we have a higher standard for ourselves. We’ve looked at the ways of the world and seen that they’re lacking, and decided there was something better, something really better. We’ve had enough of the falseness of the world. And we look inside and realize that a lot of that falseness is in us as well. So we’re here to make ourselves more true. I mean, it’s more than just saying true things, but actually being true to the practice, holding ourselves to a high standard. This goes against a lot of the messages in our society today. When they hold you to a high standard, say, at work, and then for the rest of your life they say, “Well, just do as you like. Relax. Be kind to yourself.” Their notion of being kind to yourself is kind of like to have chocolate wisdom. There are those little wrappers that say inside, “Have another chocolate. Be good to yourself.” Well, we want something better than that. So we have to do better than we’re doing. After all, this is a path that leads to the realization of things we never realized before. The attainment of things we never attained before. So it means we’re going to have to do things we’ve never done before, exert ourselves more than we have in the past. Otherwise, we’ll just keep going around and around and around, the same old way we’ve been going around for who knows how long. You have to be a certain kind of outlier in order to want to get out. There’s a popular Buddhism that’s all about how to live nicely in your daily life. Have some stress reduction. Feel good about what you’re doing in your life. Feel good about yourself. Then they leave it right there. Again, it’s consumer Buddhism. But you have to ask your inner consumer, “Is that going to be good enough for you?” And you should say, “No.” In that case, what do you have to change in your behavior while you’re sitting here meditating? Can you say, “Honestly, you’re one hundred percent with the breath all the way through the hour, and then even as you get up from the hour you stay with the breath?” If not, there’s room for improvement. As you do your chores, it’s a good way to develop this attitude on the external level, that you do more than is expected of you. Do a really good job. And then you turn around and you take that habit of doing a really good job and you apply it inside, which is where it really is important. So as you look at your behavior, you think of that question that the Buddha has you ask every day, “Days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I becoming right now?” Hopefully you’re becoming a better meditator, better at generosity, better at virtue, and better at the meditation. There are ways in which the practice is very gradual, so it’s hard to measure. Today’s meditation is better than yesterday’s. But there should be an overall trend that you find that you’re getting more meticulous about things, that you’re getting more eager to do things well, more willing to put in extra energy. That’s a sign of progress. Because when you take care of the causes like that, the results are bound to come. So think about what the Buddha said about success in the meditation. It’s based on desire, and it’s the desire that’s tuned just right. In other words, it’s not too slack and it’s not too harsh. It’s just right. The same with your persistence. Not too slack, not too harsh, but steady, something you can maintain so that it becomes and builds that momentum. And you do that by being really intent on what you’re doing. This attitude of, “Well, good enough to get by.” It’s not good enough. We’re not just trying to get by, we’re trying to get out. And that’s a different prospect entirely. So the intent is basically part of the reflection. There’s that strange passage in the Canon. What’s strange about it is that it appears only once, and it’s just kind of tucked into a sutta that is kind of random in its range of topics. But the Buddha says, what is it that nourishes the Dhamma? It’s commitment and reflection. You commit yourself to the practice and then you reflect on what you’re doing. And you figure out where it can be improved. In terms of the four bases of success, the desire and the persistence are the commitment. The intent is also part of the commitment, but the intent is also part of the reflection, together with your powers of analysis. You really want to do this well. Then you find yourself slacking off. You learn how to talk to yourself in such a way that you get yourself going. Beware the Dhamma voice that is too harsh, but also beware the Dhamma voice that says, “Be kind to yourself.” Again, think of the Dove chocolates. Do you want to spend your life eating the meditation equivalent of Dove chocolates? Do you want something better? So commit and reflect. And really commit to your reflection. Reflect on your commitment. The two qualities improve each other as you go along. And the Dhamma gets nourished that way. If you think about Ajahn Mun and all the other great Ajahns, they could have lived very simple lives, in the sense of just doing what society expected of them. Nobody expected a movement like this coming out of the Northeast. Most of them were born to peasant families. Nothing much was expected of them. They’d be ordained for a little while, then disrobed, and then go back and have families themselves. That was what was expected. But they all wanted something better. And when they saw that there was the opportunity to find that, they took it. Think of Ajahn Fu, an orphan at a very early age. Then he got older and began reflecting on his life. He realized that if he didn’t make something special out of himself, it wasn’t going to happen on its own, because he didn’t have much to fall back on. He was going to have to create what he could fall back on. Well, the same really applies to all of us. No matter what perfections we’ve developed so far, if we don’t keep building them, if we don’t keep adding to them, we turn our virtue into heightened virtue or our concentration into heightened mind. If we don’t do that, then these things just wear away, wear away. So try to hold yourself to a high standard, because it is for your own good. We talk about the duties that the Buddha recommends that we follow. Well, they’re all for your own happiness. Sometimes they seem awfully hard, but they happen. Happiness, if you want it to be genuine, requires that you be genuine and not just take the easy way out.

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