

There's Work to Be Done

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During my second or third year as a monk, I was translating the Ajaan Lee autobiography. I happened to mention to one of the other monks how, after a couple of hours of translation work, I was really tired. He said, “What’s there to get tired about? You just sit there making little marks with your pen.”

Then after I was working on that project for a couple of weeks, he decided he’d try his hand at translating it into *Isaan*, the dialect of the North-East, which was where he was from. He gave up after a couple of days. He said he ended up with a headache every day. The work of the mind is heavy work. To think, you have to use the body. There’ll be a little pattern of tension here, a little pattern of tension there, to correspond to the different thoughts that you want to keep in mind. If you have a lot to keep in mind, there’s going to be a lot of tension.

So, as we get the mind to settle down, we’re trying to unwind some of that tension.

But it’s still work. It’s like a big ball of rubber bands. Some rubber bands are easier to pull off; others are more entangled. After all, as you get the mind to settle down, things *should* open up inside. But there are parts of the mind that don’t want you to open up. They’d rather stay in their shell.

So you have to learn how to work around them. Ultimately, we want to get a full-body awareness, with a sense of pleasure and ease that fills the body. But there will be parts that resist. If you focus directly on them, they’ll resist even more.

They’re like wild animals. If you stare at a wild animal, it’ll run away. If you act like you don’t know that it’s there, it’ll hang around for a while and not feel so threatened.

So when you’re first dealing with these blockages inside—and they’re both mental and physical at the same time—work around them. If there’s a tightness in the heart, go down either side. A tightness in the stomach, work down the back. Then, as you treat the rest of the body with gentleness and sensitivity, these parts may feel less and less threatened, more and more willing to open up.

You have to realize that when you make up your mind to meditate, it's not like the whole mind has agreed to meditate. There are the parts that will say, "No." Some of them are old, wounded parts. Others are simply parts that want to have some fun. They like to think. And the meditation is work. *Kammattana*—one of the words for meditation, literally means, "the work place, the occupation."

You've got to learn how to settle down very quickly, and as you settle down, give the mind a comfortable place to stay, an interesting place to stay with the breath. Try to take interest in this energy going through the body.

After all, a lot of your health depends on it. Among Ajaan Fuang's students who continued meditating after he passed away, the ones who really were most devoted were the ones who seemed to have a persistent illness of one kind or another. They realized that the only way to keep it under control was to work with the breath. So they had very good motivation to stick with it.

But whatever way you can think about being with the breath and settling down with a sense of ease, to make it interesting and pleasant, you've got to provide the motivation. The Buddha gives his images and analogies for the world, to make you realize that you don't want to come back. The world seems to be doing its best to show its bad side nowadays. Just when you think things couldn't get worse, they get worse. The human imagination for making a mess is huge.

So let that be your motivation. You want something solid that you can depend on. When you see institutions faltering, and people who are supposed to be leaders behaving in venal ways, it reminds you: You Can't. Really. Depend. On. The World.

The world offers no shelter, there's no one in charge. It's like a playground where there's nobody watching out for the kids to make sure that the bullies don't beat up the weaker ones. There's no proctor, no one overseeing things. So that should be motivation enough to say, "I want something that's really solid and safe."

And the Buddha is offering something very solid here. Sometimes you hear it said that Buddhism teaches "lack of essence." And there are some schools of Buddhism that will teach that. "Nothing has any essence," they say. It's supposed to be a great thing. Your defilements have no essence, so once you see they have no essence, they have no power over you.

But if your defilements have no essence, then goodness has no essence., either. And then what are you going to depend on? But as the Buddha said, the Dhamma does have an essence, a *sara*. Release is the essence. There is something that is unchanging that we can find, as we dig down into the mind.

But it's going to require digging through a lot of changing things and building the path. This is the work of the meditation: turning your state of mind from just an ordinary state of mind that's looking for pleasure, into one that's going to lead you someplace, to that changeless essence. Because that's the only place where there's safety. But it is there.

So thinking about that should get you motivated. Whatever the problems you have in the mind, you've got to get around them. And everything *can* be gotten around. There's no problem in the mind that the path cannot deal with. It's simply up to us to be willing to use the path—and to use some ingenuity in applying the path's basic principles.

After all, when the Buddha set out the Dhamma, he was setting it out for the long term: something that would last for thousands of years. That required making sure that the principles were really clear, but they had to be stated in such general terms that they would apply no matter what the context, what the culture, what the time.

So we as individuals have to take the basic principles and learn how to use them, how to apply them. That's where our motivation comes in. It doesn't require a lot of book learning to do this, but it does require a very observant mind. And a mind that's willing to *look* at itself. Honestly.

Because it's not the case that all the venality and all the problems are out *there* in the world outside. After all, where do these things come from? They come from the human mind. And our human minds have a lot of potentials inside to head in the wrong direction.

So do what you can to motivate yourself—whatever way works for you to stick with the path and not get discouraged. Don't let the parts of the mind that don't want things to open up inside divert your attention off the path.

I've heard some people say that “working at concentration” goes against the basic principles of not-self. But then what is the principle of not-self? It's not the

principle that “there is no self,” or “there’s no one responsible, there’s no one who’s going to benefit from this.”

The Buddha never taught anything like that at all. The basic principle is that things that would pull you off the path, you have to see as not-self: not anything worth claiming as yours. Things that would lead you to do or say or think things that would not be in your best interest, you’ve got to see those as not-self.

Not-selfing is something we do all the time. We decide that something is not worthy of our interest, not worthy of claiming as ours, and we alternate it with selfing, as we see that other things *are* worth laying claim to. We claim some things for a while, and other things for another while.

The Buddha’s asking us to be more systematic about this, more strategic about both of these processes. So you do hold on to the precepts. You do hold on to the concentration. You dedicate yourself (your self)—after all, the Dhamma requires that you commit yourself (your self)—and as for anything that would pull you away, that’s not-self.

You need a healthy self in order to practice. And what makes it really healthy is that, when you’ve reached the end, you let it go, not out of anger, out of disgust, but simply because you don’t need it anymore. Because “self” and “not-self” are both strategies for happiness. When you’ve found the ultimate happiness, when you’ve found that essence, you don’t need those strategies anymore. Both those perceptions can be put aside.

So take heart that this path does go to something that’s really of essence, but it’s going to take work. You have to develop the sense of yourself as being capable of doing it, and *wanting* to do it. And having the resources inside to carry it through. There may be work, but it’s good work.

And you’re working with a sense of comfort. That’s what the concentration’s for. You’re not just strung out, working really hard, with nothing to keep you going. The concentration is there as food. But as with any store of food, you have to work to make sure it stays well-stocked—and that you’ve got the right balance of foods for your needs.