

Shelter

August 9, 2011

It's common in Thailand, when doing construction work in the monasteries, to remind everyone that your real dwelling is not outside. It's inside—the qualities you develop in the mind. So now that we're starting construction on some monk huts, it's good to keep that point in mind. On the one hand, we do develop a lot of good qualities as we work on projects like this together. And on the other, we have to remember that our real refuge and our real place of rest is inside. You want to appreciate both.

One of the first things you learn when you're doing construction work is patience. I noticed this when years back a problem in an earlier construction project required that the problem be solved very quickly—we had a very unfriendly inspector from the county. We had a couple of Americans working on the problem, and they complained the whole time—how unfair it was that the inspector had required those changes, and how difficult it was. I kept thinking that back in Thailand, this is not how they would do it. Everyone would be trying, at least to some extent, to lighten the load by not complaining, by seeing the humor in the situation, or by seeing something positive in the situation.

Which is not to say that there is no disharmony during construction in Thailand. There's plenty there, too. But an important part of learning patience and endurance is learning how not to weigh yourself down unnecessarily, to look for the positive things, to look for your strengths. Learn how to wear your problems lightly. This is what a sense of humor is all about. If you learn how to make light of difficult things, you find that they're not so difficult, because you're not weighing the mind down. You're a lot more ready and able to deal with the problems.

Back in Wat Dhammasathit, when we started working on the chedi—a spired monument on the hill—there was an old monk who, as soon as we started construction work, left the monastery, saying he didn't want to be around for construction work. Ajaan Fuang's comment was, "Well, I don't have enough perfections yet. I've got to stay and see this one through." So look at this as an

opportunity to develop your perfections, your determination. All the hard-working perfections—determination, patience, truth, persistence: These are the things that see you through.

Then there are the qualities that work both ways, leading to success both inside and outside—leading to concentration within the mind and leading to success in whatever task you take on outside. These are the qualities of the bases of success. There are four. The first is desire—desire accompanied by the fabrications of exertion. Persistence accompanied by the fabrications of exertion: You find out that the fabrications of exertion actually have to do with persistence and effort. Then there's intent, accompanied by the fabrications of exertion. And then there's using your powers of analysis, again, accompanied by those fabrications of exertion. These are the things that lead to success.

Desire is the first one because you have to *want* to do something before you can do it well. For example, as you're building this dwelling in the mind here, you have to see that as a good thing—something that you really want.

I was talking today to someone who was saying that for long time she had trouble getting her mind to settle down; now that she's finding it easier, she's slacking off in her practice, getting complacent. When that happens, you have to keep reminding yourself of how necessary it is to have a state of mind that can settle down not only when conditions are good, but also when conditions are difficult. And conditions can change, which means that you have to test your concentration in different situations. See how long you can maintain it; see how long you can protect it. Keep that bowl of oil balanced on your head so that not a single drop slips out. The desire has to be motivated by a sense of heedfulness and a sense of pride in your skill, a sense of appreciation—the quality they call “respect for concentration.”

The Buddha had to emphasize that twice. In the passage we recite, he talks about having respect for the Triple Training, and goes back again and mentions respect for concentration. Concentration is already there in the Triple Training, but it's a part that people tend to overlook. You have to keep reminding yourself of how really important it is, because when it's there, it's so easy to take it for granted. It's just quiet. Sometimes it comes with more intensity—there can be a sense of rapture, refreshment, a sense of light in the body. But often it's

accompanied by just a pleasant sense of fullness and ease. The mind very quickly asks, “Well, what’s next?” This is where patience has to come in.

This is where we move from the desire into the persistence. When the concentration is not there, you’ve got to work on it; when it is there, you’ve got to learn how to protect it, and just keep with it, keep with it, keep with it. Patience is a quality that’s so underdeveloped in our modern society. We want everything to be quick, quick, quick. We want to learn how to have patience quickly. The important part about patience is that it takes time. You have to be willing to take time, with a sense of confidence that this project we’re working on right here—getting the mind to settle down, getting a good place for the mind to stay—is going to take time because the mind is a very complex phenomenon. Part of it is willing to settle down and another part is not.

This is where you need your negotiating powers, dealing with all the obstreperous voices inside, learning how to see through their tricks, rewarding them when they’re cooperative: all the strategies you need in order to get the mind to settle down. Then once it settles down, you have to stick with it.

An image that Luang Pu Khamdee liked to use was that getting the mind to stay settled is like being a hunter—you have to be very still, very alert, and extremely patient. The hunter never knows when the rabbit or whatever is going to show up. If the hunter isn’t still, it scares off the rabbit from far away. If the hunter isn’t alert, the rabbit can go right under his nose and he won’t notice it. The patience there, of course, is being willing to stay there, waiting for the rabbit, because it may or may not come, and certainly it’s not going to come on schedule.

People are often very impatient: Once the mind gets settled down, they say, “Okay, where are the insights?” The insights take some time to mature. You can’t guarantee that they’ll come tomorrow or the next week or whenever. Actually, the opportunity for insight is always there. A lot of opportunity comes from your willingness to hold with the concentration, even when there are other distractions, even when there are other things you’d like to think about. That way, your typical habit of wandering off the breath a little bit and then coming back, wandering off a little bit and then coming back, gets smoothed out so that you really are with the breath all the time. That’s when the insights are going to come: both in the process of smoothing things out and in seeing what comes up when

they are smoothed out. This takes time. So patience here is an important part of persistence.

Ajaan Fuang used to make a pun in Thai. He said, “Mindfulness is a little something but it’s something that you have to do continually.” The word *nit* in Thai spelled one way means little, and in another way, means something you do constantly. That quality of consistency and constancy is what’s going to allow you to pierce the things that you ordinarily would get deflected by, to go right through them. When you don’t get deflected, you can see what’s lying behind them. Upasika Kee talks about layers of film in the mind. You’ve got to pierce through those layers of film if you want to see something clearly. That takes persistence and consistency.

Which moves into the next quality, which is intent: You really want to pay a lot of attention to what you’re doing. You don’t want to just go through the motions or multitask while you’re sitting here. You’ve got one task: to stay with the breath, stay with the breath sensations in the body. And again, just as that quality of consistency is going to make all the difference, it’s helped by this quality of intentness—that you really are paying attention, intent on what you’re doing. As I said, the opportunities for insight are there all the time. The mind is constantly fabricating things, constantly creating states of becoming. All the things that you read about in dependent co-arising are happening all the time. You have to pay careful attention, you have to look really carefully, if you’re going to see these things.

Finally there’s the ability to analyze what’s going on—to clear away what’s unimportant and look carefully at what is, to get a sense of cause and effect. When a problem comes up, you want to be able to tease it out. After all, that’s what understanding suffering and stress is all about—it is *the* big problem. And the Buddha’s approach is a problem-solving approach. You look for the cause and then you attack the cause. That’s what puts an end to the problem. If you just attack the surface, the problem stays and festers.

So when an issue comes up in the mind, you want to sort things through to find out what’s causing it. Try to change what you’re doing and see what that does. If you’re focusing in one way, try focusing in another. If you’re looking at one level of the breath, maybe it’s a good idea to look at another one. For all the

talk we have about the breath energy in the body, I am always mystified by people who just stay with the in-and-out breath, and try to make the in-and-out breath do everything. Sometimes you have to take the opposite approach, which is to be with a subtler breath sensation in the body. Make yourself fully aware of that type of sensation, and allow the in-and-out breath to find its own rhythm as you keep the rest of the body fully alert, fully relaxed. Think of all the breath channels opening up and see what the in-and-out breath does. There are lots of ways of playing around with the breath energy, and it's through the playing around that you get a sense of cause and effect.

So these are the qualities you need to develop this home in the mind where you feel at ease, secure and protected from all the winds of the world, all the rain of the world, the heat and the cold. Those fabrications of exertion are the ways that you deal with physical, verbal, mental fabrications. Physical fabrication, of course, is the breath. Verbal fabrication is the way you direct your thought to something and then evaluate it. Mental fabrication covers perceptions—the labels the mind applies—and the feelings that go along with whatever you're experiencing. You want to learn how to adjust these to make your inner home just right.

Adjusting feelings may seem the strangest of the group, but as you work with the breath, with the way you perceive things, with the way you think, then you're going to change the way you feel. There's also the fact that the body has lots of different feeling potentials. There are parts of the body that would give rise to a great sense of ease and rapture if you simply allowed them to have a little space. There are parts of the body that—if you focused on them the wrong way—could give you a lot of pain. So you realize: It's up to you to decide where you're going to focus and how you're going to perceive these potentials. The feeling tones in the body will change; the feeling tones in the mind will change.

These are things you need in order to develop that desire, that sense of patience and persistence, so you want to pay them really close attention. Figure them out. It's in this way that your hut inside is going to succeed. It's actually going to get built. The roof will be watertight. Everything will fit nicely. And you'll have a shelter that you can really depend on.