

Strength from Within

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We tend to think of the Thai forest tradition as something very Thai, but that's because over the course of many decades it has been able to redefine what Thai Buddhism is, what Thai culture is. When Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Sao were starting out, though, they met with a lot of resistance. In Ajaan Mun's words, he was determined to follow the customs of the noble ones which, as he said, were very different from Thai customs or Laotian customs or any other culture. Regular culture is a culture of people with defilements shaped by greed, aversion, and delusion, whereas he wanted out of that culture. And the way out was to follow the customs of the noble ones.

Ajaan Chah has a very interesting discussion where he talks about how controversial both Ajaan Sao and Ajaan Mun were for many years. People used to get into arguments. Families would even split over whether they thought Ajaan Mun was right or not. And you have to wonder what kept him going. Well, it was his determination, one, to find the true path to the end of suffering and then, two, his skill in strengthening that determination in the face of a lot of resistance and controversy.

Here we are practicing in another culture of people with defilements, so we have to take Ajaan Mun's example as encouragement and as an example, as something to follow—starting with the determination that we don't want other people's defilements to determine what our path will be. After all, you look at the Forest tradition in terms of what people might say from the outside. They were sons of peasants up in the Northeast, which was the poorest part of the country. There wasn't much hope for them, if you looked just from outside. And the society certainly hadn't assigned the sons of peasants a particularly good role. But Ajaan Mun didn't let that deter him, and his example then inspired many other people from the same place, in a similar situation.

So here we are, living in a land of wrong view. We don't want to let those wrong views determine our practice or how far we can go in our practice or what we should be doing in our practice. We want to take the example of the noble ones as our guide. But simply having the example is not enough. We have to be able to strengthen ourselves from within.

Of course, the Buddha's teachings on strength are very important here—the five strengths: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. You notice that the three middle strengths there are basically identical with the section of the noble path that deals with meditation practice. So the meditation, of course, will be our real strength. But in addition, you need conviction and discernment.

Conviction here means believing that your actions really are important. Ajaan Lee, when he was giving a Dhamma talk to one of his students who was on her deathbed, reminded her that strength of the body and strength of the mind keep us going, but ultimately we have to depend on strength of the mind. When he talked about conviction, he said it really comes down to the precepts. If you really are convinced in the principle of kamma, you won't break any of the precepts, particularly not the five big ones.

As you realize that what you do—the decisions you make about what's okay and what's not okay—will have a huge impact on the course of your meditation, the course of your life, and the state of your mind, you'll naturally want to be very careful about all the precepts you've taken on. You'll want to be very meticulous. This is your protection. You're protecting yourself from your defilements; you're protecting other people from your defilements. As you apply the precepts in all situations, as the Buddha said, you're giving universal safety to all beings: good beings, bad beings, beings in between, people you like, people you don't like. You can't be picky about who's going to benefit from the fact that you're observing the precepts.

At the same time, you want to make sure you don't try to influence anybody else to break the precepts. That's your responsibility. Sometimes people say that there are dilemmas where one precept comes into conflict with another, but I can't think of any where you'd have to lie in order not to kill, or kill in order not to lie. The Buddha set the precepts out so they wouldn't be in conflict.

Now, our desires about what we want to protect and don't want to protect in our lives may come into conflict with the precepts, but the Buddha said you need to hold to the precepts across the board and to learn how to question your likes and dislikes if you take the Dhamma as your guide. So as you hold to the principle that you really do believe that your actions make a difference and you want to act in ways that are skillful, the precepts are a good test for your conviction—and also a good training in maintaining that conviction.

But the precepts on their own are not enough. You've got to train the mind. That's what the three middle strengths are about.

Persistence basically means right effort. Anything unskillful, you want to avoid it, abandon it. Anything that's skillful, you want to give rise to it and develop it. The word *want* here is important. It's actually part of the definition of right effort: You generate desire. Not all desire is bad in the Buddha's path, you know. The craving that leads to suffering is specifically three kinds—for sensuality, for becoming, and for non-becoming—but the desire to do well on the path is not part of the cause of suffering. It's part of the path. So you try to nurture that desire, give rise to it, and nourish to keep it strong.

Again, one of the customs of the noble ones is that you delight in abandoning unskillful qualities and delight in developing skillful ones. So you want to learn how to take delight in this. I was mentioning the other day one of my students who tends to put himself into difficult situations to strengthen himself and to have a good story to tell when he comes back. You can see that he's taking a lot of delight in it. It becomes something that's fun to do. It's a challenge that he's up for. So whatever you can do to encourage yourself in the direction of this challenge is all part of the path.

Mindfulness is also a kind of protection in that it helps you remember the lessons you've learned and remember the lessons from the Buddha about what should and shouldn't be done, what counts as skillful and what doesn't count as skillful. You want to always keep those things in mind as your main frame of reference. This means not focusing on the values of the people around you.

One of the values of our society is the desire to please people.

There's a tendency nowadays for people to think that Buddhism is all about adapting itself. Well, that comes from the fact that most of us have learned about Buddhism in school. And in schools what can they talk about? Can they talk about whether the Buddha really put an end to suffering? No, they can't. All those professors with all of their degrees, none of them can use any of their scholarly techniques to determine whether the Buddha could put an end to suffering, so they talk about other things. They talk about how this text says that and that text says this and this group of people say that and they practice like this.

And what do you have? There's no standard for answering the big question you want to bring to Buddhism is: Does this really put an end to suffering? But because they can't answer that question, they talk about everything around it. And what's around it becomes, "This person changed Buddhism that way by that text and that person changed it with that practice," and all of a sudden Buddhism becomes something that people create and change over time: to please themselves, and to please others. That's what Buddhism is all about, they say: pleasing people. But we can't hold by that.

We have Ajaan Mun as our example—we have Ajaan Lee and all the other forest ajaans. For them, the customs of the noble ones set the standard across the board. You want to hold that standard in mind—and in your heart. It includes being content with your material possessions. The more you can be content with whatever material possessions you have, the less dependent you are on other people's opinions. That's a way of freeing yourself.

These are some of the things you want to keep in mind. In addition to your topic of meditation, keep the values behind it in mind as well.

Concentration is also a strength. It's all very fine and good to have a lot of knowledge about what the Buddha taught, about what the ajaans taught, but what really carries you through is your ability to get your mind still in all kinds of situations. You might take that as a challenge: Can you keep your mind still for long periods of time when you're alone? Can you keep your mind still when you're in noisy places? When you're with other people? Where do you find it difficult to keep your mind still? Well, try to work on your strength so that you can find stillness even in difficult places, difficult times. As you work on that strength, as you exercise it, it becomes something you can rely on more and more.

Your ultimate strength, of course, is discernment and wisdom, the ability to see where you're causing unnecessary stress and suffering, and how you can relieve it. What you're doing: You can see yourself doing it and you can stop. That's basically what it comes down to: You see that the problem is not with people outside, it's with your own actions, and the attitudes behind your actions. We sometimes blame people outside for making us do this or say that, but why do they have that influence? Look inside. You're the one that let them have that influence.

All of these qualities are undergirded by the quality the Buddha calls heedfulness. You realize that your actions really do make a difference and, if you're not careful, you can cause a lot of trouble. If you *are* careful, you can avoid that trouble. Suffering is not inevitable. We have that chant that "We haven't gone beyond aging, illness, and death." Well that's a matter of the body. Those things will happen. But whether we'll suffer or not suffer over them, that's not predetermined. It depends on our choices.

This is the point when you realize that when aging comes, illness comes, death comes, doctors can help you to some extent with those things, your friends can help you to some extent with those things, but the question of whether you're going to suffer or not: That's something you've got to take care of for yourself. The more you're prepared, the easier it's going to be. And there's no need to wait, saying, "Well, I'll deal with that defilement some other time." How many other times are you going to have? How much more time are you going to have? You don't really know. You do have this time right here, right now. And if you have the determination to make each moment of your practice count, the benefits are sure to come.