Skilful Desires

Adapted from a Dhamma talk offered by Ajahn Jayasāro
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As I remember, the majority of the teachings that Ajahn Chah gave were not particularly or startlingly profound. They didn't consist of things that you'd never heard of before, where you would say, 'Wow – esoteric Buddhist teachings in the forest! If I hadn't come here I would never have had the opportunity for this kind of initiation, or this kind of unheard revelation of the Dhamma.' Instead, it was more that every single word he said struck home. It was as if we were hearing those teachings for the first time, but at the same time it wasn't new information which needed a whole extensive vocabulary. Often he was able to express himself in very simple terms, which we could either understand for ourselves or with the help of a friend who would translate for us. But these words struck home, and they struck home because of the relationship, the feeling that we had, the devotion, the faith in him that we felt. So he was able to create a situation in which learning took place.

Through his own example and his personal presence and power, we felt this great sense of *chanda* in practice. I don't know how many people are familiar with this word, but it's a vital word to understand. Western presentations of Buddhist teachings have often led to the understanding that suffering arises because of desire, and therefore you shouldn't desire anything. Whereas in fact the Buddha spoke of two kinds of desire: desire that arises from ignorance and delusion which is called *taṇhā* – craving – and desire that arises from wisdom and intelligence, which is called *kusala-chanda*, or *dhamma-chanda*, or most simply *chanda*. *Chanda* doesn't mean this exclusively, but in this particular case I'm using *chanda* to mean wise and intelligent desire and motivation, and the Buddha stressed that this is absolutely fundamental to any progress on the Eightfold Path.

In the four *Iddhipāda*s, the Four Paths to Power, *chanda* is the first. In the presence of *chanda*, *viriya*, effort, arises. Effort is in many ways the characteristic *dhamma*[1] of this whole school of Buddhism. In fact, the Buddha referred to his teachings not as Theravāda but as *viriyavāda*. It is a teaching of effort, a teaching that there is such a thing as effort, that effort can be put forth, effort should be put forth, and that effort is what is needed for progress on the Path.

[1] *dhamma*(s): phenomenon/a; mental objects; quality.

When we lived with Ajahn Chah at Wat Pah Pong, he was able to create around him, within the hearts of his students, this sense of *chanda*. One way that we can talk about *chanda* is by distinguishing it from the unwholesome kind of desire which is *taṇhā*. One of the most observable differences is that *taṇhā* is focused on the result of an action, while *chanda* is focused on the action itself. So *taṇhā* wants to get, wants to be, wants to become, wants to get rid of, wants to be separated from something. *Chanda* wants 'to do'. As I recall, in those days after evening chanting Ajahn Chah would often say, 'Now is the time to go back to your *kuṭis* and put forth effort.' He didn't say, 'Go back and meditate'. So our practice was conceived in terms of effort and it was the putting forth of effort which was important, and the willingness and interest to do that came through *chanda*.

I've very rarely taught meditation in the West, but in Thailand the common problem with lay meditators is that they look on meditation practice as work which you perform in order to get a reward that is called 'peace'; so you meditate in order to become peaceful. When people meditate and they don't become peaceful, or they don't achieve the kind of peace which they imagined they should be achieving, they become frustrated and discouraged, and even despair of meditation altogether or assume that they don't have the spiritual faculties necessary to be able to benefit from meditation. In many ways we can say that following the Path is the fruit, and this is something that I find myself talking about a lot. To make a comparison, let's say a small child is learning to walk. If you were to say, 'Well, where did the child walk to today? How far did he or she get?', that's not the point. The child wasn't standing up, walking a few steps, falling down and getting up in order to get somewhere. It didn't fail because it didn't get to a particular place. Similarly, if you're learning to ride a bicycle, it's not important where exactly you ride to. The question is, can you balance on a bicycle? Can you control a bicycle? Can you ride a bicycle? The goal is not riding to a particular destination.

I suggest that we look at meditation practice in the same way. We say, 'Why are we putting forth this effort?' Well, in order to be someone who knows how to put forth effort all the time in an appropriate way; someone who is able to put forth effort consistently, whatever the surrounding conditions are,

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whatever the obstacles might be. This ability to put forth unremitting effort is the goal itself. That's not to say that there's no interest in *samādhi*. But *samādhi* will come of itself. It's a natural consequence of this precise, devoted, consistent, wise effort.

In working life, some people will consider work as a drudge and a miserable imposition that you have to grit your teeth and get through so that you win the reward of a monthly or weekly wage. This can lead to a lot of unhappiness at work, and can easily be a cause of sloppiness and even corruption and dishonesty if work is looked upon as merely a means to an end. And if you can find an easier means to the same end, then why not? But if the focus is turned towards the work itself, and not towards waiting for some pleasure or happiness which will arise in the future as a result of the work – finding joy, interest in the work for its own sake – that is not to say that you won't get your wage; you get your reward afterwards anyway. It just doesn't have to be constantly on your mind. This can be an attitude towards meditation too. So it's not, 'Oh, I've been meditating for so long and I still haven't got this and haven't reached and realized that ...' The question is, are you someone who can put forth effort consistently? Can you find joy and interest in putting forth effort?

... the Buddha spoke of two kinds of desire: desire that arises from ignorance and delusion, which is called taṇhā, *and desire that arises from wisdom and intelligence ...* chanda.

For children, whether they like something or don't like it is a kind of moral imperative. You say, 'You do this.' 'No!' 'Why not?' 'I don't like it!' 'Why are you doing this?' 'Because I like it.' This is the rationale of the child: 'I will do it, I want to do it because I like it', and: 'I won't do it' or 'I shouldn't have to do it because I don't like it.' But although we can garnish and camouflage it a bit as we get older, it's often the rationale of the adult as well. We have things that we like and we find reasons to explain why we like them, while not really being honest enough to recognize that usually the sense of like or dislike comes first and the reasons come afterwards. The very simple observation is that some things we really like are to our detriment in the long term; they can be harmful to us and others. Similarly, some things that we dislike can in the long term be for our benefit and happiness. Therefore we can't assume that our sense of like and dislike is an adequate or reliable indication of whether or not we should spend time doing something, or associating with people or things.

So what we're learning from meditation is the ability to stop and look, and not be carried away by or give overdue importance to these fleeting feelings of liking and disliking; we're learning to put forth effort. And in Ajahn Chah's words, 'When you feel diligent and enthusiastic you meditate, and when you feel lazy you meditate.' You're recognizing those feelings, but you're not allowing them to condition your effort.

As I mentioned, the ability to put forth effort depends a great deal on *chanda*. When you start any meditation period, it's important to recognize that *chanda* is not always there. Even with monks and nuns, people who are giving their lives to this practice, the sense of *chanda* fluctuates. If you lack that sense of interest and *chanda*, and uplift and enthusiasm for practice, the meditation can very quickly grind to a halt or run into quicksand; you have serious problems. That's why I think it's worth just checking the amount of interest at the beginning of a meditation, and if it's lacking, being willing to spend some time cultivating it, bringing it up. The more you apply yourself to doing this, the more fluent you will be and the more easily you can do it, until it becomes almost automatic.

One of the simplest ways of doing this is to use our thinking mind to reflect on two subjects. The first is the suffering and drawbacks inherent in the lack of mindfulness, inner peace and wisdom. We can draw upon particular areas or events in our lives which have quite clearly caused great distress to ourselves and others, and can see very plainly their results, such as a lack of inner awareness, lack of mindfulness, lack of inner discipline and inner *Vinaya*. We can also draw upon the experiences of the people we know and how they have particularly affected us. The second way of using the thinking mind is to reflect upon all the blessings of mindfulness, inner peace, wisdom and compassion. Perhaps we can bring up cases of great monks, nuns, and teachers to whom we look up, and how much we revere their peace, calm, kindness, compassion and wisdom. We can remind ourselves that they are not the owners of these qualities, that they weren't born with these qualities; that these qualities manifested in them through effort, and that great teachers are vessels for beautiful, noble qualities. And just as they are vessels, so we too can be vessels: men and women, from both Western and Eastern countries. Birth as a human being means that we have within us the capacity to manifest every noble quality, and that we should try to do so.

There are many different ways of reflecting on the disadvantages and suffering inherent in a lack of mental training and development. Similarly, we can reflect on the advantages and blessings of mental training and development. As you do this more and more, and become more fluent, the process can become very rapid. But the point is that we are recognizing that the groundwork, the preparing of the mind in order to give it sufficient integrity and maturity to make use of meditation techniques, is dependent on this quality of *chanda*. If we overlook that or just go straight into the meditation practices when our minds lack the readiness to do so, the result can be frustrating and can lead to a lack of progress on the Path.

Ajahn Chah was someone who gave us this *chanda* for free. But at the same time, unlike some teachers, he took no pleasure in his disciples' devotion. He never indulged in it. Indeed, if he saw that any monk was becoming overly devoted to him individually – becoming attached to him, in other words – often he would just send him off somewhere hundreds of miles away for a year or so to get over it. And so we had this feeling that he always had our best interests at heart, but it wouldn't always be very comfortable for us. He wasn't someone who just wanted to keep his closest disciples around him and bask in that sense of

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being loved and respected; not at all. But one important characteristic of the way he taught was that he would bring things back again and again to the Four Noble Truths, not as philosophy but as personal experience. Although we can accept the idea – the value of going against the grain, going against the stream – in practice very few people are able to do that on a consistent basis without becoming overly ascetic and serious, and somewhat twisted. Or else they put forth a lot of effort for a short period, and then just let it all go and feel guilty. Then they go to the opposite extreme again and are super-strict for a while, but are unable to sustain it.

The inability just to go steadily against the stream of *taṇhā*, particularly at the beginning of practice, is a formidable obstacle, but one which has to be surpassed or surmounted. So Ajahn Chah set up his monastery and life there in such a way that there was this constant rubbing against your likes and dislikes, and just a sufficient amount of discomfort to compel you to look and see where the suffering was coming from. He would famously tell us that as a monk you can cut out a lot of distractions, but you can't cut out *all* distractions. This means that you simplify everything, and you're able to watch the mind a lot more easily.

... our practice in any day, whether we're alone, with family or at work ... is to take care of the mind and protect it as best we can.

But three areas which monks can still indulge in are sleep, food and conversation: you have to keep a watch on these. He said, 'Don't eat a lot, don't sleep a lot, don't talk a lot', because eating, speaking and sleeping are the dangers for indulgence in monastic life. He wouldn't let you have the chance to sleep, eat or talk as much as you wanted, simply so that you could see the craving for that kind of indulgence and release. This is not a sadistic practice, but one in which you have to be able to say, 'Yes, I'm suffering. Why? Because of craving; because I want something, or I want something I'm not getting, or I'm getting something I'm not wanting.' This is the value of coming to monasteries and being with monastics, and having groups of friends who give energy to each other and act as *kalyāṇa mitta*, as wise friends. We had this sense of going against the grain, just a little bit; not so much that it felt heroic or unsustainable, but just going outside our comfort zones a wee bit. And it's in such situations that some real progress can take place.

If you look on meditation as confined to a particular posture, it can be very frustrating. So what is our practice today? Well, our practice in any day, whether we're alone, with family or at work – whatever we're doing, wherever we are – is to take care of the mind and protect it as best we can. This is why I recommend seeing practice in terms of what the Buddha called the Four Right Efforts. Firstly, we practise to prevent the arising of unwholesome *dhamma*s that have not yet arisen. Our second area of work is to make the effort to deal with unwholesome *dhamma*s that have arisen by skilfully and constructively reducing and eliminating them. The third area of work is seeking ways of instilling and manifesting wholesome *dhamma*s that have not yet arisen in our hearts. Lastly, with those wholesome *dhamma*s that have arisen, we don't take them for granted, but seek to develop them as much as is possible. The Buddha said that prior to his enlightenment, the two virtues that he depended on more than any others were unremitting, constant effort, along with a lack of contentment with the wholesome qualities that he'd already developed.

Meditators need to be contented with material supports and discontented with the spiritual virtues and accomplishments they have already attained. In daily life this is something that can be applied anywhere. For instance, you have to go to a meeting or you have a particular task to perform, and you ask yourself what are the kinds of unwholesome *dhamma*s that tend to arise: 'When I meet that person I always get so irritated, he's so selfish or so conceited.' This is your meditation. Your practice that day is, 'How can I spend an hour with that person without getting irritated with him, feeling averse to him or contemptuous of him?' But in the case where you do lose your temper or get upset with somebody, you ask, 'What strategies do I have, what practical means have I developed or should be developing to deal with that? And in a particular situation that I'm going to find myself in today – with my family, friends, colleagues at work – what are the wholesome *dhamma*s, the particular kinds of virtues that I can be working on: right speech, patience, kindness, compassion? Where should I be applying those qualities? How should I be applying them? And those qualities that I have developed, how can I take care of them, nurture them and lead them even further onwards?'

These aspects of Dhamma mentioned above give a very wide and comprehensive grounding and structure for practice. Formal meditation techniques are essential in that they are a concentrated form, one in which you temporarily put aside all distractions, and they give a power and an uplift to the mind which will enable the application of the Four Right Efforts in daily life to be successful. But at the same time, the more you put effort into these four areas in daily life, the more you'll enjoy and benefit from meditation. Thus you are finding ways of fine-tuning your motivation so that it's in the practice itself – the excellence of the practice itself – where you begin to trust that the results of that right, wise effort will manifest as a natural consequence. ☙

Ajahn Jayasāro received the Admission into the Bhikkhu Sangha in 1980 with Venerable Ajahn Chah as his preceptor. Ajahn Jayasaro's entire life as a monk has been based in Thailand, and from 1997 until 2002 he was the abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat. He is currently living alone in a hermitage at the foot of the Kow Yai mountains in central Thailand.