

## Just Do It

BY AJAHN JAYASARO

Whether you're learning to meditate or ride a bike, says Ajahn Jayasaro, it's not about how good you are or how far you get. The point is simply to practice with a sincere and consistent effort. As I remember, the majority of the teachings that Ajahn Chah gave were not 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 needing an extensive vocabulary. Often he was able to express himself in very simple terms, and they struck home because of the relationship, the feelings of devotion and 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 misconception that because suffering arises out of desire, you shouldn't desire anything. In fact, the buddha spoke of two kinds of desire: desire that arises from ignorance and delusion, which is called *tanha*, craving, and desire that arises from wisdom and intelligence, which is called *kusala-chanda*, or *dhamma-chanda*, or most simply *chanda*. *Chanda* has a range of meanings, but in this case I'm using it to mean wise and intelligent desire and motivation, which the buddha stressed as being absolutely fundamental to any progress on the eightfold path.

Of the four *iddhipadas*—the four paths to power—*chanda* is the first. In the presence of *chanda*, effort, or *viriyā*, arises. Effort is in many ways the characteristic dhamma of this whole school of buddhism. In fact, the buddha referred to his teachings not as Theravada but as *viriyavada*. 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.

When we lived with Ajahn Chah at Wat Pah Pong, he was able to create around him, and 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, or *tanha*. One of the most observable differences is that *tanha* is focused on the result of an action, while *chanda* is focused on the action itself. So *tanha* 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 *kutis* 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 that was important. The willingness and interest to do that came through *chanda*.

I've very rarely taught meditation in the West, but in Thailand a common problem among lay meditators is that they take up meditation practice in order to become peaceful. When people meditate and they don't become peaceful, or they don't achieve the kind of peace they imagined they should be achieving, they become frustrated and discouraged, and even assume that they don't have sufficient spiritual aptitude. In many ways we can say that following the path is the fruit; 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. You could say, "Well, where did the child walk to today? How far did she get?" but 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.

She didn't fail because she didn't get to a particular place. Similarly, if you're learning to ride a bicycle, it's not important where exactly you go. The question is, can you balance on a bicycle? Can you control a bicycle? Can you ride a bicycle? The goal is not to ride 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, we do it in order to be someone who knows how to put forth effort consistently and in an appropriate way, whatever the surrounding conditions are or 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 samadhi. But samadhi will come of itself. It's a natural consequence of this precise, devoted, consistent, and wise effort.

In working life, some people consider work 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; if work is looked upon as merely a means to an end, it can easily be a cause of sloppiness and even corruption and dishonesty. If you can find an easier means to the same end, then why wouldn't you? but if you turn your focus toward the work itself, and not toward waiting for some pleasure or happiness that will arise in the future as a result of the work, it doesn't mean you won't get your reward; you'll still get your wage. It just doesn't have to be constantly on your mind. This can be your attitude toward 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?

For children, preferences are understood as a kind of moral imperative; for a child, it makes perfect sense to say, "because I like it, I will do it" or "I shouldn't have to do it because I don't like it." We can garnish and camouflage it a bit as we get older, but in fact, this is 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 afterward. 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 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 particular people or things.

So what we're learning from meditation is the ability to stop and look and not be carried away by these fleeting feelings of liking and disliking. We're learning to put forth effort. 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 for 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—that 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 checking the amount of interest at the beginning of a meditation, and if it's lacking, you need to be willing to spend some time cultivating it, bringing it up. The more you apply yourself in this way, the more fluent you will be in cultivating chanda, and the more easily you can do it, until it becomes almost automatic. One of the simplest ways of doing this is to reflect on two subjects. The first is the suffering inherent in the lack of mindfulness, inner peace, and wisdom. We can draw upon particular areas or events in our lives that have caused us great distress, or distress to others, and see very plainly their results, such as a lack of inner awareness, mindfulness, and inner discipline. 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 call to mind the examples of great monks, nuns, and

teachers whom we admire, 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, but rather 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 too can we be vessels. Having been born as a human being, we have within us the capacity to manifest every noble quality and must 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 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 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 a monk was becoming overly devoted to him—becoming attached to him, in other words—often he would send him off somewhere, hundreds of miles away, for a year or so to get over it. So though we had this feeling that he always had our best interests at heart, 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 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 as monastics we can accept the idea of going against the grain, 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, then let it all go and feel guilty. Then they go to the opposite extreme again and are superstrict for a while but are unable to sustain it.

The inability to go steadily against the stream of tanha, particularly at the beginning of practice, is a formidable obstacle, but one that has to be 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 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.

Sleep, food, and conversation are three areas in which monks can still indulge, and you have to keep a watch on these. Ajahn Chah 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 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 kalyana mitta, or 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. It's in these situations that some real progress can take place.

If you think of meditation as being confined to a particular posture, it can be very frustrating. So what, then, is our practice today? Well, 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. This is why I recommend seeing practice in terms of what the Buddha called the four right efforts. First, we practice to prevent the arising of

unwholesome dhammas that have not yet arisen. second, we make the effort to deal with unwholesome dhammas that have arisen by skillfully and constructively reducing and eliminating them. The third area of work is to seek ways of instilling and manifesting wholesome dhammas that have not yet arisen in our hearts. Lastly, we don't take those wholesome dhammas that have arisen for granted but seek to develop them as much as possible.

The buddha said that prior to his enlightenment, the two virtues that he depended on more than any others were unremitting constant effort and a lack of contentment with the wholesome qualities 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, when you have to go to a meeting or you have a particular task to perform, you can consider in advance what kinds of unwholesome dhammas tend to arise: perhaps there's a particular person you find selfish or conceited, so whenever you meet him, you feel irritated. This becomes your meditation.

Your practice that day is asking the question, how can I spend an hour with that person without getting irritated with him, without feeling contemptuous of him? but in the case where you actually do get upset with somebody, you then consider what strategies you have. What practical means have you developed or should you be developing to deal with that? Ask yourself: In the particular situation I'm going to face today—with family, friends, colleagues—what are the wholesome dhammas, the particular kinds of virtues I can be working on? right speech, patience, kindness, compassion? Where should I be applying those qualities? How? And those qualities that I have developed—how can I take care of them, nurture them, and lead them even further onward?

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 that 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 you begin to trust that the results of that right wise effort will manifest in your practice as a natural consequence.

AJAHN JAYASARO was ordained as a monk by Ajahn Chah in 1980. From 1997 to 2002 he served as abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat, an international monastery in the Thai Forest Tradition. Currently he lives in a hermitage in central Thailand.