

We Are All Translators

AJAHN MUNINDO

Buddhist contemplations on: form and **spirit**,
trust and **belief**, goal oriented practice, **source
oriented practice**, formal and daily-life practice,
knowing for yourself, wilfulness and **relaxation**,
precepts, **creativity**, balance, **and other things...**

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by Ajahn Munindo

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*Truly it is yourself that you depend upon;
how could you really depend upon another?
When you reach the state of self-reliance
you find a rare refuge.*

Dhammapada v.160

On this occasion I would like to discuss the effort that we are all making in our work to translate the practice of Buddhism. Maybe it hasn't occurred to you that you are a translator. I would like to suggest that we are all translators, in the sense that the teachings which we have inherited from our Asian brothers and sisters cannot be simply uprooted and

then replanted in another place on the planet without due attention to the differing environmental conditions. While we gladly recognize there are certain universal principles in the teachings, there are obviously also some aspects that are relative to culture and tradition. So the manner in which we are taking up Buddhist practice and the kind of effort we are making is our contribution to this shared task of translation. This is as important as, if not even more important than, the work of translating texts. Can we become more conscious of our contribution to this task as we make it?

I have often spoken about identifying what pertains to form in the teachings, compared with what is in the domain of spirit. Mixing up these things can mean that we put emphasis in the wrong place, and in so doing we end up with results that we didn't expect. But sorting out such matters is far from easy. The sparkling radiance of these exotic teachings and techniques readily dazzle us, especially since we have been

in the dark for so long. We might feel contented to settle for that initial bedazzled response to this new-found light. However, the Buddha was consistent in his encouragement to not be fooled by the way things appear to be; only after careful scrutiny should we fully accept something to be true. The point of this encouragement was that we should come to know directly for ourselves the benefit of the teachings. On the other hand, it is not suggesting that we dismiss things because we don't see the sense in them straight away. So how should we approach this matter of discerning the spirit of the teachings?

DISCERNING ESSENCE

The point of our taking up the Buddhist Way is to find support for our heart's yearning to be free, and it is natural

that we begin by observing the way in which others engage in practice. But although a particular technique or system has been applied successfully by one person, it does not mean that it will work for everyone. It is wise to ask, ‘What is important to me? What is it that is quickened in me when I see a teacher, or hear a teaching?’ I like to think about religious forms as being like conventions around eating. If we are hungry, the point of eating food is to become free from the discomfort of hunger. Whether you go to a Japanese restaurant and eat with chopsticks, or a Thai restaurant and eat with a spoon, or a place where you use a knife and fork, the conventions are not the point. The point is that we are fed. So it is with practice. The point is that our heart is nourished. So our task is to identify what it is that is nourishing, and to focus on that. This is identifying the domain of spirit. If we give this task priority, whatever this might mean in our own case, then there is a better chance that forms that support the spirit

will evolve rightly. Not to give spirit due priority means we might be missing out on what is most of value in a religious tradition.

Something we could miss out on is a creative participation in our enquiry. If our translation is going to be relevant, we have to be creatively involved with it. Yes, we respect the forms that we inherit; we have to begin with learning that which has been tried and tested. At times this requires that we simply do what we are told; at this stage, learning the form is the priority. For example, if we are learning T'ai Chi, we don't question the master because the movements feel uncomfortable, and then on our third lesson make some suggestions as to how the form could be altered. No: although in the beginning we might feel awkward and look a little silly, we simply learn the form and humbly accept that it doesn't quite feel right, remembering that these forms are supports for spirit – in this case, the flow energy in the body.

If we practise the form with commitment then hopefully we eventually learn to relax into the form. Then perhaps we will feel the benefit of the practice and we will be grateful.

So we are not dismissing forms. We take up the various forms of practice and wait patiently until we settle into them. Then we feel for the meaning behind the form, which is what I am referring to as the 'spirit'. Once we are familiar with the spirit, that becomes the main focus. This way we will be better placed to change the forms if needed without risking compromising or obstructing spirit. If we attempt to adjust things too soon, based on our likes and dislikes, we could be creating obstructions.

A friend of the monastery relates a story about a valuable lesson he learned during his first year of training under an experienced cabinetmaker. Starting out on his apprenticeship as a young man, this friend had been given a brand-new, top-of-the-range hammer as a gift from his father. It

was perfectly balanced, with a wooden handle – just what an aspiring cabinetmaker would dream of. His master instructed him numerous times on how he was to hold his hammer towards the end of the handle so as to gain the best swing. But although a beginner, our friend thought he knew better. If you are new at carpentry, it does feel easier to hold the hammer nearer the head; you feel like you can be more accurate. After a number of reminders, the boss one day took hold of our friend's beautiful hammer and proceeded to saw half the handle off, declaring that since he was not using that half he obviously didn't need it.

HOLDING RIGHTLY

We respectfully look at the practices that we take on, feeling for the spirit. The teacher says practise this way, don't practise

that way. We do what the teacher says but, as we proceed, we are checking and feeling. We do not just believe. It is necessary to trust our teacher, but trust is not mere belief. There is a big difference between trusting in what teachers are offering and believing in them and their techniques. Many of us came into this path with conditioning from a different religious tradition; one which holds up belief as the whole point. Such an approach cannot be applied in Buddhist teachings.

In Buddhism, beliefs are functional. We believe in things like rebirth, for example; we believe that when we die we are reborn. But most of us don't know this to be objectively true. I don't know that it's true. I believe it, but the way in which I believe hopefully means that if somebody says it is all nonsense, then we won't have to quarrel. I choose to hold a belief in the process of rebirth, but I make an effort to hold this belief lightly. The belief is not the end point.

When our teacher tells us to practise in a certain way, we

take this teaching on trust. When teaching about purifying our hearts from obstructions, the Buddha used an image of a goldsmith purifying gold. I think this simile could also be applied to the effort we make in purifying our relationship with the teachings; a process of removing the dross over and over again until we get pure gold. We purify our relationship to the teachings by cultivating enquiry and feeling into how they work for us. When we are practising various exercises and techniques and we find something is not working, we start having doubts. That's fine. Doubts do not have to be an obstruction in our practice. Doubts can also indicate that the spirit of enquiry is alive within us.

Enquiry is something that comes naturally to us in the West, and we should value it. This capacity for enquiry is one of the contributions we are able to make to the task of translation. We shouldn't automatically assume that, because our experience appears to be contradicting what someone

else is saying, they are right and we are wrong, or vice versa. We listen. We feel for what is being said. We patiently enquire. And if we proceed with a willingness to go gradually, translating everything we experience into practice, then I trust that an organic and lasting understanding will be born out of our effort.

As we discover for ourselves what works and what does not, a confidence grows, bringing benefit to us individually and to the community at large. Discovering our own true way of practice is like finding a good restaurant; the first thing you want to do is take your friends along. My sense is that if we arrive at such confidence in a gradual way by respectfully questioning as we go along, we spontaneously find our own ways of expressing it. We are not just using other people's words. Such confidence will spill over – we might not even notice it happening.

THE TWO ORIENTATIONS OF EFFORT

One way of illustrating this task of translating the practice is to look more closely at how we internalize the teachings. If the kind of effort we make is not coming from a place of confidence, not only are we wasting energy, but we could actually be doing ourselves harm. I see a lot of confusion in the way many meditators relate to the different types of effort required in practice. There is sometimes quite a naïve hope that by endlessly plugging away, doing what they have been doing for years, something good will come out of it.

These days I feel convinced that there are basically two different and distinct orientations of effort – what I refer to as goal-orientation and source-orientation. For many years I tried to practise by having a goal ‘out there’ to strive towards. My understanding of the teachings as I heard them was that this was what I should be doing. I received instruction in

various techniques, which were oriented towards realization of this goal. The goal was called ‘enlightenment’ or ‘the deathless’ and so on, but it was always ‘out there in the future’. I was encouraged to make great effort to achieve the goal and to break through those things that obstructed progress towards it. And even when the words didn’t directly say that the goal was ‘out there’, that was the message that I heard. Eventually I found myself in a terribly frustrating knot. At one point I felt that my whole commitment to practice was seriously challenged. Gratefully, with some help, I came to realize that part of the struggle I was caught in was about the very feeling of having to get somewhere. I had internalized a sense that I had to fix myself somehow, change what I was and get somewhere else. Clearly it wasn’t working, and little by little I started to give up. In giving up I experienced a sense of beginning a different sort of journey. Instead of the journey coming to a sad and sorry end, I found myself settling into

a new approach – one that felt more natural. And with this shift came a feeling, initially unnoticed, of being genuinely personally responsible. This was new.

This experience contributed to my developing a practice characterized by a strong sense of trusting in that which already exists. This was altogether different from striving towards achieving some goal. The effort that this new appreciation spontaneously called forth was ‘not seeking’. My attention was – and is – looking and feeling in this moment; enquiring, ‘Where and when do I decide this situation is somehow inadequate or wrong or lacking?’ I found that I was able to notice quite clearly when I was imposing on life some notion of how it should be, thinking, ‘it shouldn’t be this way, it should be that way.’ My practice became that of simply, but resolutely, being with this awareness. Now I refer to this as source-oriented practice – in which a trusting heart intuits that what we are looking for is right here, not

anywhere else, not somewhere out there.

FAULTY WILL

Many of us start meditating with a faculty of will that is not doing its job properly. In trying so hard and for so long to wilfully fix ourselves, we have abused the very faculty of will. Now we can't help but habitually overdo it and interfere with everything that happens. We often feel unable to simply receive a situation and gently apply will to direct and guide attention. If we find something that we think is wrong we tend to automatically slam an opinion on it – that 'it shouldn't be this way', and then we set about wilfully trying to fix it.

For those of us who suffer this dysfunction, engaging the will as the primary tool of meditative effort just doesn't

work. Whereas, if we disengage from willing and abide in a mode of trusting in that which already exists, trusting in reality and truth, if we simply stop our compulsive interfering, then there is a better chance of an accurate and conscious appreciation of that which already exists revealing itself.

If you follow a path of practice that is goal-oriented, you can expect to have a clear concept of what you should be doing and where you should be going. There will be appropriate actions to take for any obstacles that you might encounter. But if your path of practice is source-oriented it is not like this at all. Here you come to sit in meditation and you might begin by checking bodily posture, making sure the back is upright and the head is resting comfortably on the shoulders, chest open, belly at ease; and then you sit there, bringing into awareness the sense that you don't know what you are doing. You simply don't know. All you know is that you are sitting there (and there may be times when

you are not feeling sure about that). You don't hang on to anything. But you do pay attention to watching the tendency of the mind to want to fix things. You focus interest on the movement of the mind towards taking sides, either for or against.

Usually when I sit in meditation I assume a conscious posture and simply observe what's happening; maybe the mind is all over the place – thinking about the liquorice I had the other night at somebody's house, or about how it's a pity the sun has gone in, or about how I will be in Beijing this time next week, or about how the monks at Harnham sent an email asking whether they should use gloss paint for the doors in the monastery kitchen, and so on. Such thoughts might be going through my mind, but I don't try very hard to do anything in particular with them; until I start to feel a little bit uncomfortable, and then I watch to see where that discomfort is coming from. It is usually coming from: 'I

shouldn't be this way. I should be... My mind should be clear, I shouldn't be...' When we identify that which takes us away from our natural feeling of centredness, there is a better chance we will start to settle. This is not the same kind of effort one would be making in goal-seeking practice.

KNOWING FOR YOURSELF

Most of us have a natural tendency to incline towards one of these two orientations of effort. Some people are contented and confident when they have a clear sense of the goal – that is where they are supposed to be going. Without a clear idea of where they are going, they become confused and anxious. Others, if they focus on the idea of a goal, end up depressed, feeling like they are failing: trying to stop thinking, they fail; trying to sit properly, trying to make themselves happy, trying

to be kind, trying to be patient, trying to be mindful – they are always failing. What a terrible mistake! The worst disease of meditators is trying to be mindful. Some quit, feeling they have been wasting their time. However, if we realize that we don't have to do anything other than be present with an awareness of the tendencies of the mind to take sides for or against, then a new quality of contentment might emerge.

These two orientations are not mutually exclusive. It is useful to understand how each of them has particular merits at different stages of practice. In the beginning, to build up some confidence, it is necessary that we have a good grasp of techniques. Even though we may relate more readily to source-oriented teachings and practices, if we haven't yet found a foundation on which to practise, or if we have found that foundation, however our life is very busy, it can still be appropriate at times to intentionally make effort to exercise will and focus on techniques.

I encourage people in the beginning to be very disciplined and to count their out-breaths, being quite precise in the effort made. This way we get to know that our attention is indeed our own. We are not slaves to, or victims of, our minds. If our attention is wandering off and we get caught up in resentment, then we need to know that we are responsible for that. Our practice, whether we are goal-oriented or source-oriented, is not going to progress until we are clear that we are responsible for the quality of attention with which we operate.

To reach this perspective it may be necessary to exercise a rigorous discipline of attention for a long period of time. Yet we may reach a point at which we sense that in continuing to make this kind of effort we need to refine the techniques and systems to pursue a goal. But if we encounter a deep conviction that to do so is no longer appropriate, then we need to be ready to adjust – to let go altogether of seeking

anything. If it is right for us to make this choice, then when we hear someone talking about their differing way of practice, we will perhaps find ourselves saying, ‘That’s fine’, and not be overly intimidated by their enthusiasm and conviction.

As we settle more comfortably and confidently into making our own right effort it becomes easier to recognize the various strengths and weaknesses of different styles of practice. In goal-oriented practice, for example, it is probably easier to generate energy. With a clear concept of what you are supposed to be doing, attention narrows, you make an effort to remove distractions, and you focus, focus, focus. By being so exclusive, energy gathers; this way you readily observe yourself progressing along the path. This in turn supports faith. As with everything, there is a shadow side to this, which is directly related to this strength. In being so exclusive you risk chopping out things that could be useful or need to be addressed; there is a danger of denial. If old

neurotic habits of avoidance have not been addressed and you follow a goal-seeker's practice, then those tendencies can become compounded. This is one aspect of fundamentalism. And despite popular belief there have been, and there are now, Buddhist fundamentalists.

One of the strengths of source-oriented practice is that as we release out of the striving and the aiming for something other than here-and-now, a balanced, whole body-mind relaxation can emerge, drawing on our creativity. We have to be creative, since by not excluding anything, everything must be translated into practice. There is no situation that is not a practice-situation. However, unwise creativity can harbour delusion. If we are so happy and relaxed that we are getting lazy or heedless with the precepts, for example, then we need to recognize what is going on.

Another danger in source-oriented practice is that when we really do get into a pickle we could feel disinclined to

do anything about it. This tends to happen because we no longer relate to structures in the way we used to. Faith for us is inspired not by a concept of what we hope lies ahead, but by a sense that what we trust in is already essentially true. However, if the clouds of fear and anger overshadow the radiance of our faith we can tremble badly, and possibly even crumble. In this case it is important that we have already cultivated spiritual friendship. To have the blessing of association with others with whom we share a commitment to conscious relationship is a precious resource. When we gather in spiritual companionship, a special feeling of relatedness can emerge in which we rightly feel safe. This relative security can be for us what concepts and goals are for goal-striving spiritual technicians.

As we progress in our practice each of us has the task of checking to see whether we are moving into or out of balance. But how do we assess how things are moving? If we are

moving into balance, it means we can handle more situations, we can accommodate states of greater complexity. If we are moving out of balance, it means we can handle fewer and fewer situations: instead of spiritual practice liberating us and opening us up to life, it makes us exclusive and painfully cut off.

So it is wise to examine our practice and see if we can find the direction we feel we move in most easily, which orientation of effort comes most naturally to us, what sort of language works for us. We need to prepare ourselves with the understanding that teachers of these different approaches use different ways of talking. So listen to the teachings you receive, contemplate that which you read in books, and see which orientation of effort makes sense to you. Once you know, I suggest you go with what inspires you.



Hopefully you can see how this contemplation is an important part of our contribution to the shared task of translating practice. May we all feel encouraged to investigate the contribution we are making to this task at this stage in its unfolding in the West. I like to think that our careful enquiry will show up our weaknesses, individually and collectively, and when we become quietly aware of our deficiencies we will be creative; we will be able translators of the practice; adaptation will happen where it is necessary and it will be in the service of Dhamma. Possibly we won't even notice it. We will just know that the spirit of the practice is alive within us and that our hearts are more at ease.

Thank you very much for your attention.

About the Author

AJAHN MUNINDO was first accepted into the *bhikkhu* sangha under the Venerable Somdet Nyanasamvaro in 1975 and then again later under the Venerable Ajahn Chah in 1976. He came to the UK in 1980 after a brief visit to New Zealand. After an initial period at Cittaviveka Monastery in West Sussex, he moved to Devon where he led the community in establishing the Devon Vihara. In 1991 he became senior incumbent at Aruna Ratanagiri.



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