

Understanding Hardship on the Path to Awakening

M.A. in Buddhist Classics
Dharma Realm Buddhist University

Paper Submitted for
Buddhist Hermeneutics II
BUCL 631

Meghan Sweet
Fall 2016

The autobiography of Chan Master Hsu Yun (1840–1959) and the biography of Thai Forest Master Ajahn Mun (1870–1949) cover many important events in their lives, including insight into their spiritual practices and attainments. Both masters' lived within the last hundred years, and thus offer a fairly modern depiction of the Buddhist path practiced to a high state of awakening. As advanced Buddhist practitioners, their lives included what may be a surprising amount of hardships and tribulations. Some of these hardships were self-imposed, others circumstantial. For example, Master Hsu Yun is caught outside in a snow storm for several days, burns off one of his own fingers in a ceremony, nearly drowns in a river for over a day and is beaten right after being rescued. Ajahn Mun survives on just rice for two months, practices alone in the forest amongst dangerous animals like tigers, and submits himself to a practice regime that he claimed resembled physical and mental torture. From these examples, one might be lead to believe that to walk the path means you need to relish or even induce suffering, or that the path is extremely difficult to cultivate, requiring extreme ascetic practices. Neither master embraces an easy path, but their relationship to hardship is different than that of an ordinary person. This leads to questions such as, is hardship essential to the path of awakening, and if so, why? How are hardships on the path of awakening different from the hardships of life in general?

Understanding Hardship through the Practice of Vigor

At times, both masters seem to embrace hardship where an easier or more pleasurable alternative may have existed. For example, Master Hsu Yun decides to complete a bowing pilgrimage, walking for years without any protection from the elements and nearly dying twice. Describing the start of his pilgrimage, he says

I walked by day and rested night, no matter whether it blew or rained, in either fair or foul weather. Thus, prostrating myself at every third step, I recited the name of Manjusri Bodhisattva with singleness of mind, oblivious of either hunger or the warmth of my fill. (36)

Due to his singleness of mind, he was oblivious to hunger or warmth. He was indifferent to his physical conditions, whether they were pleasant or unpleasant; he was unafraid and just continued in his practice. Later, his hardships become life threatening. He describes it saying,

I felt severe gripping pains in my belly...that night I shivered with malaria. On the fifth [day], I contracted dysentery but forced myself to continue my walk and prostrations and the same for successive days. By the thirteenth, I arrived at Huang Shaling on the peak of which there was a ruined temple without much shelter. As I could no longer walk, I stopped there without taking food. Day and night, I stooped a dozen or more times. I was completely exhausted and had not even the strength to get up and walk about. (40)

In this state, he is unable to care for his physical body. However, perhaps due to his sincerity, he is saved by a beggar who offers him food and medicine. The beggar (who he is told later on was a transformation body of a bodhisattva) tells him that his difficult pilgrimage is not necessary, but Master Hsu Yun replies,

I am most touched by your kind words, but when I was born I did not see my mother, who died at childbirth. I was my father's only son but I fled from him and because of that, he resigned his post and this shortened his life. As my parents' love for me was as boundless as heaven is vast, I have been unhappy about this business for several decades. Thus, I vowed to go on pilgrimage to Mount Wu-tai to pray for Manjusri Bodhisattva to protect them and deliver them from suffering so that they can secure birth in the Pure Land as soon as possible. However, many difficulties there are to face, I must reach the holy site for it would be better to die than to fail in fulfilling my vow. (41)

For Master Hsu Yun, the state of his physical body is less important than his desire to fulfill his vow of filial piety towards his parents. He considered taking care of his parents in this way as an essential element in his spiritual practice. After nearly dying, he achieved a state where "all delusory thoughts came to a sudden halt and [he] was no longer tied up by externals [*sic*], free from erroneous thoughts within" (42).

Ajahn Mun also took on extreme practices. He heard stories about a cave where many monks had gone before to practice only to mysteriously disappear, presumed dead. Despite desperate warnings of the villagers who lived near by, he decided to go to the cave and that “live or die, he wanted to put himself to the test, and so discover the truth of those stories” (26). The biography provides the following further context,

The scary tales he heard didn't frighten him in the least. In truth, he saw this adventure as a means to arouse mindfulness, an opportunity to acquire many new ideas for contemplation. He possessed the courage to face whatever was to happen, as befits someone genuinely interested in seeking the truth. So in his own unassuming way, he informed the villagers that, although the stories were very frightening, he still would like to spend some time in the cave. (26)

His attitude seems to have transcended the normal speculative worrying that most ordinary people engage in. His level of practice already gave him a level of confidence to approach anything that may happen as an opportunity to practice and deepen his mindfulness. He headed off to the cave but after several days, he started to develop a stomach condition so bad he was worried he might die. He asked the villagers to bring medicine, but it did not improve his symptoms and he became very physically weak. At this point, seeing that the medicine wasn't working, he decided to stop taking it. He made the decision to only use the Dhamma to treat his illness, and if he died in the process, so be it. His determination and resolve in this passage is similar to Master Hsu Yun's pilgrimage. Both masters decided to trust their resolve and practice up to the point of death. It's important to note that both had very well established cultivation at this point. They were not mere beginners coming with an over-aggressive arrogance. They had the wisdom to see that their resolve could overcome physical hardships, and both found this to be true in practice.

Ajahn Mun describes his mental process when he stopped taking the medicine. He began to focus solely on meditation, dropping all concern for his life and just letting his body follow

“its own natural course.” He turned his attention to his mind and “the seriousness of his physical condition ceased to interest him; concerns about death no longer arose (28). This is similar to Master Hsu Yun’s state of concentration where hunger and warmth no longer occupied his mind. Next he “directed mindfulness and wisdom to investigate the painful feelings he experienced, making them separate the body into its constituent elements, and then thoroughly analyzing each one.” He was able to fully untangle the relationship between the body and the severe pain he was experiencing, and with his insight, achieved a state of complete calm where “the pain, the mind’s preoccupations – all disappeared simultaneously.” This result seems similar to Master Hsu Yun’s description where “all delusory thoughts came to a sudden halt” and he was free from all erroneous thoughts within. Both masters passed beyond the state of being identified with their illness. Due to this, they were able to see through their attachment and achieve a state of profound stillness, free of delusory thoughts. Ajahn Mun reflected that at this point, “he was satisfied that his mind had acquired a solid spiritual basis – one he could trust, thus dispelling many of his lingering doubts.”

Both examples could be seen as practice of vigor that lead into dhyana absorption and wisdom. In Arya Nagarjuna’s commentary on the *Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, he quotes the *Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* that says “it is through being vigorous in body and mind and refraining from indolence or resting that one perfects virya paramita (the perfection of vigor)” (471). He describes that by diligently cultivating vigor, one can become single-minded in the practice of dhyana meditation, and dhyana absorption is the gateway to true wisdom (473). It seems that both masters were practicing great vigor, and through this gateway, were able to reach a new level of dhyana, that they described as “deep calm” and “free from erroneous thoughts within.” This is nearly exactly how Arya Nagarjuna describes this process, saying, “why [is great

vigor essential for dhyana]”? It is because the scattered and chaotic mind is unable to succeed in perceiving the true character of dharmas in accordance with reality” (475). He also says that intense diligence in body and mind, urgency in adhering to the practice, and not becoming lax, are the only efforts through which one can have success in gaining dhyana absorption and wisdom. In the light of Nagarjuna’s analysis, the experiences of both Master Ajahn Mun and Master Hsu Yun become clearer. They were not practicing hardship for the sake of hardship, but both took up opportunities to cultivate vigor in situations where they would need to practice diligently and urgently. Both succeed in reaching a new level of absorption in their practice through their diligence in practicing vigor.

Another commonality between both Master Ajahn Mun’s and Master Hsu Yun’s experience is that they were both willing to push on vigorously, even at the face of death. They did not seem to cherish their physical bodies, and were thus able to increase their vigor to the point of bringing about good results in their practice. However, there is a point in which ascetic practices can be too extreme, when the body becomes so weak that practice is not possible. The Buddha’s story tells how the Buddha fasted for years, until he was just skin and bones. However, finally he decided to take up food again, contemplating “This dharma [of extreme fasting] will not lead to detachment, to Awakening or release; The path I attained at that time under the rose apple tree was indeed the certain path. But that path cannot be traversed by a man who is weak” (Ashvagoshā 365). The reference to the rose apple tree is to a time earlier in the Buddha’s life when he achieved a calm, tranquil trance state that was unattached to sensual pleasures. The Buddha saw that his extreme fasting had led him to be so weak, that he could not practice the path of dhyana absorption. He decided to take up food again so that he could continue to progress.

In the passage above, Master Hsu Yun also got to the point where his body is so physically weak he could not continue his pilgrimage. In order to enter deeper concentration, he needed to regain his strength. However, although he fell seriously ill, he did not give up his resolve. He continued his pilgrimage and did not back down from his original vow. Arya Nagarjuna also describes how “non-negligence” is an important part of vigor (489). He uses the metaphor of someone going on a journey. The journey must be carried out to completion, one cannot become negligent along the way or they will never reach their goal. It is the same with walking the path to awakening. By practicing non-negligence, one is sure to reach the goal. Upon finishing his pilgrimage, Master Hsu Yun reflected, “I felt no hardship on this march, but on the contrary, I realized the harmfulness of my former self-indulgence. An ancient rightly said that ‘after reading ten thousand books, one should travel ten thousand miles’” (61). Here it seems to reflect another of Arya Nagarjuna’s descriptions of vigor— those who practice it find no difficulty in their endeavors. In fact, Master Hsu Yun found that his journey, though extremely physically difficult from an outside perspective, brought good dharmas to his mind and helped him change and move away from habits of harm. Thus it was spiritually very successful.

Understanding the Relationship between Klesa and Hardship

For those who come from a background of material comfort and external freedom, the lives of the two masters may seem at first to be very austere and difficult. They subjected themselves to years of hard practice without indulging in worldly pleasures. However, it seems they did this not in order to embrace suffering, but to finally put an end to it. While worldly people are always trying to avoid suffering, these masters wanted to put an end to suffering. One of the key practices on the Buddha’s path that ends suffering, is working to subdue and eliminate

klesa. According to the *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, klesa, also known as afflictions or defilements, are “mental factors that disturb the mind and incite unwholesome deeds of body, speech, and/or mind. In order to be liberated from rebirth, the klesa and the actions they incite must be controlled and finally eliminated” (1091). Ajahn Mun’s biographer reflects on the practice of working with klesa,

It must be understood, however, that the business of destroying kilesas is an inexpressibly difficult task to accomplish. For though we may be determined to burn the kilesas to ashes, what invariably tends to happen is that the kilesas turn around and burn us, causing us so much hardship that we quickly abandon those same virtuous qualities that we meant to develop. We clearly see this negative impact and want to get rid of the kilesas; but then, we undermine our noble purpose by failing to act decisively against them, fearing that the difficulties of such action will prove too painful. Unopposed, the kilesas become lord masters of our hearts, pushing their way in and claiming our hearts as their exclusive domain. Sadly, very few people in this world possess the knowledge and understanding to counteract these defilements. Hence, living beings throughout the three worlds of existence are forever surrendering to their dominance. Only the Lord Buddha discovered the way to completely cleanse his heart of them: never again did they defeat him. (14)

From the perspective of Ajahn Mun or any other serious practitioner, the harm caused by continuing to create klesas that cause one to cycle endlessly through death and rebirth should be avoided. Only through accepting the task of working with the klesa and eventually ending them, can one walk the path of awakening.

Ajahn Mun chose to live most of his life in the forests, far removed from material comforts and surrounded by potentially dangerous wild animals. He also encouraged many of his disciples to do this. One benefit of the forest practice was that it created a heightened motivation and mindfulness for working with the klesa. In his biography, it says,

In the eerie solitude of living in the forest, the constant fear of danger can motivate the mind to focus undivided attention on the Foundations of Mindfulness, or the Noble Truths. In doing so, it acquires a solid basis for achieving victory in its battle with the kilesas – such is the true path leading to the Noble Dhamma. (66)

In the forest setting, the harshness of the environment seems to have motivated the monks to maintain a vigilant mindfulness. Additionally, they would be far away from conditions that might stimulate the five desires and allow the klesa to outflow towards external objects. As a result, the cultivators can more easily practice dhanya absorption and establish a stillness of mind that has strength over the habitual pull of the klesa.

In another passage, Ajahn Mun's says that he had to practice moment-to-moment vigilance in order to keep watch over his klesa. His biography says,

Acariya Mun said that if his meditation practice were compared to an illness, it would be a near-fatal one, since the training he undertook resembled physical and mental torture. There was hardly a single day when he could just relax, look around, and enjoy himself as other monks seemed to do. This was because the kilesas became tangled up with his heart so quickly that he barely had a chance to catch them. Should his mind wander for only a moment, the kilesas immediately gave him trouble. Once they had established a hold on his heart, their grip became ever tighter until he found it difficult to dislodge them. Consequently, he could never let his guard down. (93)

It was only until he developed some skill in his practice that he was able to relax somewhat and help others with their practice (93). Why is it that Ajahn Mun took the klesa in his heart so seriously, while ordinary people do not? One answer is expressed in his biography, which says, "normally the heart has become such an extension of the kilesas that we are unaware of its intrinsic value. This happens because the heart is so thoroughly impregnated with kilesas that the two become indistinguishable. The heart's real value is then obscured from view" (98). For ordinary people, their hearts and minds are so interwoven with klesa, they can't even imagine things being any other way. This being the case, they just try to avoid suffering and seek after pleasure. However, a Buddhist practitioner is aware that there is an alternative, and is able to cultivate real freedom.

Master Hsu Yun also connects the practice of choosing to not move with the klesa in their habitual patterns as a condition of his enlightenment experience. Speaking of his sudden enlightenment, he says, “if I had not fallen into the water and been gravely ill, and if I had not remained indifferent to both favorable and adverse situations, I would have passed another life aimlessly and this experience would not have happened today” (67). Because he was able to remain indifferent to all situations, he broke through the habitual power of the klesa and had an awakening.

Conclusion

By looking through the lenses of the paramita of vigor, and the practice of subduing and eliminating klesa, the lives of Master Hsu Yun and Ajahn Mun are contextualized and more easily understood. As someone who is still consciously and unconsciously very attached to comfort, at first the extreme nature of their practice was difficult to reckon with. However, by seeing how their practices are aligned with the path to awakening, their hardships take on a new meaning. Practicing vigor because it leads one further down the spiritual path into dhyana meditation and eventually wisdom is a very different context than simply undergoing hardship as pure karmic retribution that needs to be absolved. While karma is likely still at play for both of the Masters during much of their lives, in their practice they are not merely responding to karma, but actually practicing to be free and at ease and bring about the perfection of wisdom.

By looking at the lives of the two masters through the lens of Buddhist theory, I was able to more clearly see how they were enacting the same process that the Buddha himself undertook. Their lives were unique to their conditions, time and place, but also contain a timeless quality,

shown by the similarities between the two and how well their life stories corresponded with theory on Buddhist practice.

Works Cited

- Aśvaghoṣa, and Patrick Olivelle. *Life of the Buddha*. New York: New York UP, 2008. Print.
- Buswell, Robert E., and Donald S. Lopez. *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2014. Print.
- Nāgārjuna, and Dharmamitra. *Nāgārjuna on the Six Perfections: An Arya Bodhisattva Explains the Heart of the Bodhisattva Path: Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra Chapters 17-30*. Seattle, WA: Kalavinka, 2009. Print.
- Ñāṇasampanno, Boowa, and Dick Silaratano. *Venerable Acariya Mun Bhuridatta Thera: A Spiritual Biography*. Udorn Thani: Forest Dhamma of Wat Pa Baan Taad, 2003. Print.
- Xuyun. *Empty Cloud: The Autobiography of the Chinese Zen Master, Hsu Yun*. Rochester, NY: Empty Cloud, 1974. Print.