June 18, 2024

In the evening chanting, we often have juxtapositions like the one we had just now. On the one hand, the Dhamma summary is, “The world is swept away. It’s insufficient. There’s nothing of its own, a slave to craving.” And then the next pass is starting out with metta. “Spreading goodwill even to snakes.” This reveals something very interesting about the attitude that the Buddha has us bring to the practice. Most people, when they focus on their own sufferings or the sufferings of the world around them, start getting very resentful. The attitude being, “If I’m suffering, I’ll let everybody else suffer as well.” But the Buddha has us bring an noble attitude, a noble heart, to the practice. “If they’re suffering, I’m suffering. I don’t want anybody to suffer.” It would be good to see everybody happy. Whoever is happy already should develop an attitude of appreciation for their happiness. Instead of grasping and struggling as a way to overcome happiness, we find patience, grace, goodwill, all the noble qualities of the heart. These are the path to true happiness. So it’s good when we start out to meditate that we keep this perspective in mind, keep this attitude in mind. So as we’re meditating, we’re not grabbing after things. We’re willing to watch. We’re willing to be patient. We’re willing to be good-natured about whatever comes up in terms of pain, frustration, whatever the difficulties. Try to develop that nobility of heart. Remember, when I first went to stay with the Chan Foo, one night he told me about how he felt the day in which he discovered that John Lee had passed away. He said he didn’t cry, he didn’t feel any sadness. There was just kind of a quietness in his mind. Then a few days later, he talked about one time he’d been up in the jungles of northwestern Thailand. Actually, the forests up in the hills there are pretty jungly. They have bleaches and things. One day, after his alms round, he had some extra food. There was a hill-tribesman who sometimes would come over and help around a little place where he had a hut. So he offered the food to the hill-tribesman, and he knew that the hill-tribesman was pretty poor. Yet the hill-tribesman said, “No, thanks. I have enough.” He said that brought tears to his eyes, that nobility of sadness. So try to bring that nobility to your meditation. Whatever comes up in the meditation, have a good-natured attitude toward it. Find that the mind is scattered about. Don’t get frustrated. Be patient. In fact, it’s the patience that’s going to cure the scattered mind. When you focus on the breath, create some space around the breath. Don’t try to squeeze it in the direction you think it ought to go too fast. Watch. Be observant. The type of concentration we’re trying to develop here is very focused but very relaxed. That’s a combination that’s often very difficult. Oftentimes, when we focus on something, we tense it up just to give ourselves a little something extra or something noticeable to focus on. Yet the fact that we’re tensing up makes it difficult to maintain that focus. So you start with one point and do what you can to get that relaxed. If you have trouble getting it relaxed, tense it up. Consciously tense it up first, and then allow it to relax back to where it was before. Keep going in that direction of further relaxation, and then stay right there. Then move around to another spot in the body, and then another. Do the same thing all around the body. Get a sense of what it’s like to have the different spots relaxed. You can go down the back and compare. How does the right side of one part of your back feel in comparison to the left side? If any side seems more tense than the other side, try to relax it there, and then go down. Make a comparison right and left of the next spot, and then the next, and the next. Go down the back. Compare your right leg with your left leg, your right hip with your left hip. Be willing to take the time to get really acquainted inside here. Getting to know the body, getting to know the breath, is like any friendship. It takes time. If you have the proper attitude, an attitude of patience and an attitude of trust, that this path is going to work. You find that things go a lot better than if you try to force things into your preconceived notions about how they should be. It’s like what the Buddha said about getting to know other people, getting to know them in terms of their virtue, getting to know them in terms of their endurance, their fairness, their wisdom. You have to be patient and you have to be observant. The meditation is a similar process. You’re getting to know the breath. There’s a lot to the breath that we miss because we jump in and try to force it to be this way, force it to be that way. There’s always going to be an element of forcing, all the way until the attainment of stream-entry. So the question is how to learn to use that to your advantage in such a way that you don’t squeeze things off too much or you don’t get in your own way. This is why Chan-li places so much emphasis on focusing on the breath in such a way that the breath feels comfortable. Experiment with different ways of breathing. Become sensitive to the breath energy in different parts of the body. When you begin to loosen up the tension, say, in your arms, in your hands, in your feet, you find yourself more sensitive to the impact of the in and out breath on your awareness of the different parts of the body. So experiment. If things don’t work out, have a good-natured attitude about it, and then try a new approach, and then another one, and another, until you finally get something that works. Because as we’re meditating, we’re unlearning a lot of bad habits we’ve picked up from the world around us. We need to get things done fast. The Buddha says, “Be earnest in your practice,” as if your head is on fire. But that doesn’t mean rushing in and forcing things to go in a preconceived way. We’re dealing in unexplored territory here. Even if you’ve meditated many, many, many, many times, there’s still more to explore. There’s still more to learn. And you see best by being careful. And to be careful, that requires a certain patience and inner stillness. We say we meditate in order to get the mind to be still, but it requires a certain inner stillness. There’s a term in Thai that they call “yen chai,” which literally means “cool-heartedness.” There has to be an element of that already in the mind. For the meditation to develop further. So you’re earnest in what you do, but you do it with patience. It’s only that way that you begin to notice the subtle things that would get pushed out of the way by a mind in a rush, or get trampled over or squeezed out of the way, when you’re operating in the sense of, “I want to get results as fast as possible and then get out of here.” We do want to get out of here, in the large sense of the term. We do want to gain release. But it requires patience. As Ajaan Fu once said, “If Nirvana was something that you could push your way into, everyone would have gone there a long time ago.” So bring an attitude of patience, an attitude of good-humored ability to laugh at your mistakes and to learn from them, so that the attitudes underlying the path have a chance to develop. Meditation is not just technique. We can’t reduce it to technique. Technique can take you only so far. It has to be based on certain attitudes of mind. Finally, it’ll take you to a place where the technique itself becomes inoperable. Some of the more paradoxical teachings in the Canon point to this fact. There’s a deva who asked the Buddha one point, “How did you cross over the river?” The Buddha said, “By not pushing forward and not staying in place.” How do you do that? How do you not push forward and how do you not stay in place? Methods of meditation do either of the two. They push you forward or they make you stay in place. But there comes a point where you have to drop the method. Some teachings would seem to encourage us to drop the method too fast. But it’s always important to remember that the method is just that. It’s to get you to the point where then you have to drop it. So having a method gives us something to test our knowledge of what’s going on in the mind. Having the net up when you’re playing tennis gives you a standard against which to measure the movements of your mind. Stick with the breath. If you make that, you’re focused. And as soon as the mind has left the breath, you know. If you hadn’t made up your mind to stay with the breath, you wouldn’t know when the mind was moving, especially not the subtle movements. So the method is necessary, especially to get us to see the role of karma, the role of actions, especially mental actions, in shaping our lives. Again, the method has to be based on the right attitude. This is why we have those chants every night, focusing, on the one hand, on the suffering, aging, illness, and death, on the attractiveness of the body, the fact that the world is insufficient, in order to cut off our craving to keep going on after. After all, the craving itself is insatiable. We become slaves to it. There’s never enough. As the Buddha once said, “Even if it rained gold coins, you’d never have it full of sensual pleasures.” Those chants are to give us a sense of saṅvega, a sense of dismay over the way we normally look for happiness. But then there are the chants on goodwill, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity. Those chants are to create the right balance in mind, so that our search for a way out doesn’t become just a selfish, grasping or selfish, resentful search. It’s a much more broad-hearted search. If we have these right attitudes and have a right understanding about the role of the method, then we can use the method to our best advantage. And to the advantage of everyone around us.

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