Battle Tactics

November 11, 2004

They say that one of the first casualties in a battle is the plan of battle, what you thought you were going to be doing, what you thought your enemy was going to be doing. When the actual battle starts, things go very differently. And it’s the same in the practice. We tend to have preconceived notions about what we’ll be fighting off, how we’ll be fighting it off. And then it doesn’t go that way. Our defilements come up in different shapes and forms than we might have imagined, in approaches that we expected to work didn’t work, or at least not the way we expected them to. And so one of the important skills, being a meditator, just as being a good warrior, is learning how to adapt to the situation, read the new situation, read the actual situation as opposed to the imagined situation, and start using your imagination. You can read about the stories of other meditators, the great Ajahn’s stories in the Pali Canon. That’s like reading military history. In other words, they give you ideas. But you never quite know exactly what situation is going to come up. So you have to develop your own flexibility in how you deal with different situations. As the Buddha said, there are basically two approaches. One is when you actively deal with a situation, and the other is when you step back and just watch. If nothing seems to work, just step back and watch until you see an opening. Or until a new idea occurs to you. It’s in that willingness to sit with a situation that may not be what you want. It’s going to make all the difference in the world as you meditate. In other words, you’ve tried a few approaches and you thought that this would get rid of greed, or this would get rid of anger, or this would get rid of lust, or this would get rid of delusion. And it’s not working. So you have two courses. One is to consult somebody else, and the other is to pose the question in your mind, “Well, what might work here?” or “Exactly what’s going on? Do I really know the problem?” That’s your first question. You may think you know the problem, and so you’re applying a technique that works for the problem that you think you’ve got. But it turns out to be a different problem. So to see that, you have to learn to step back and just watch, and learn how to watch patiently without adding more burdens on top of yourself with being frustrated that things aren’t going as quickly as you’d like, or self-recriminations. “Why am I not doing better than this? Maybe I don’t have the karma to succeed in this.” All these things just become added burdens that you really don’t need and that don’t have to be there. Be willing just to watch and see what’s happening. With that question posed in the back of your mind, what’s really going on here? In other words, appropriate attention. There is some suffering going on, so you’ve got to comprehend what’s actually happening here. In the course of trying to comprehend it, you want to look for the cause, and the cause may not be where you thought it was. So try to open up your mind a little bit. This is why the meditation tries to develop an all-around awareness, 360 degrees throughout the whole body. So you get used to looking all around, places you might not have thought. For instance, I was talking to a woman this last week who was complaining that in her meditation, sometimes she’d have a feeling of very strong delight arising in the meditation. She’d want to go for it, but then she’d remember the teaching that she shouldn’t get attached to states of pleasure and concentration. So she’d pull herself back. Once she pulled herself back, she’d get into a funk. This was a very dreary practice, and yet there didn’t seem to be any other way. It was either the pult or the delight, which she felt that she couldn’t indulge in, and then she would start indulging in the funk. Those were the only two openings that were available to her. Actually, there are lots of other things available to you in a situation like that. You can try going for the delight and see how long it lasts. Or you can see the indulgence in the funk as also a kind of indulgence, and step back from both. When I pointed this out to her, she said, “Can I do that? Isn’t that cheating?” I don’t exactly know who she was cheating. I think she thought she was cheating. But as in any battle, you’ve got to take the way out once it offers itself to you. Then when you get to a safe place, you can stop and look at what you’ve done and decide whether you took a skillful move or not. But it illustrates the basic principle that if you limit your choices to only a few options, you’re placing unnecessary restrictions on yourself. This is how soldiers die in battle. They can only think of one or two things to do at any one time, and both of them are going to kill them, and they can’t think outside the box. In daily life, this is called addiction. You have a very narrow understanding of what options are open to you at any particular time, and you have a few familiar pathways that you’ve always taken again and again and again. You know deep down inside that they don’t really work, but you can’t think of anything else. You just go where things seem familiar. It’s interesting that when a lot of people are exposed to the Dhamma, they trade one narrow set of alternatives for another narrow set of alternatives. Suddenly, they say they become afraid to express opinions, because that’s being dualistic. If you try to be totally non-dualistic in your life, you end up not having many options at all. There has to be a time for dualistic thinking and a time for non-dualistic thinking. That’s the skill in this learning to know that you have more options and try to figure out which option is appropriate for right now. Otherwise, you end up replacing the old slogans that go through your mind, “Well, you can do this or you can do that,” with Dhammic slogans that become confining, which is something of an improvement, but still it’s not going to get you where you want to go. You have to be a hunter. Think like a hunter. Act like a hunter. In other words, be willing to be very, very still and just watch what’s going on. If you throw up ideas like, “The only way to deal with this is to push right through, but I don’t have the energy to push right through,” you’ve got a problem. The next question is, “Where am I going to get the energy?” You may have to drop that particular avenue for the time being and work on building up your energy. You’ll realize that some problems require a very indirect approach. We read in the biographies of the greater Johns how they would battle through with issues. What they very rarely tell are the more indirect approaches they take. I learned a lot talking to an indirect approach. An Asian meditator in Thailand about his experiences in the woods. He’d been reading all the biographies of the greater Johns and trying to apply them to his experience, and it just wasn’t working out. It’s just the throw-yourself-in, throw-yourself-in, throw-yourself-in all the time. One day he went to see one of the famous Johns, and then John gave a Dharma talk. It was almost like Thich Nhat Hanh. He had a bell. He said, “Listen, bing!” He’d say, “Ring the bell. Listen to the sound of the bell. It’s there whether you do anything or not.” The monk realized he was pushing himself too hard. That made him reflect on the ideas he’d picked up from the books. He said, “You can’t limit yourself to just what’s in the books, even if they are books, not just the Pali Canon, but the books of the stories of the greater Johns.” Sometimes there are cultural taboos about mentioning certain approaches to the practice. We may wonder why that would be taboo. Sometimes they feel that if they talk about more indirect or gradual approaches, that they might be encouraging people to be lazy, which is a problem when you’re writing a book. You have to think about all the ways that people can misunderstand what you’re going to say. But in the particular situations that present themselves as you meditate, or that a teacher has to deal with, and individual students, you have a lot more opening for different alternatives. John Sawatt mentioned this to me one time. He’d read something in a book which he felt was inappropriate. He said, “If you’re talking one-on-one with a student, there are times when that would be an appropriate thing to say. But you can’t put it in a book, because you don’t know what situations people will be reading the book in.” So when you read these books in Good Idea, remember, it’s military history. And you can’t limit yourself to what you read in the books. Sometimes the gung-ho, really active approach in battling the defilements is appropriate. Other times you have to just sit with the defilement and watch it for long periods of time to gain some independent insights into its behavior. Sometimes the defilement you’re battling may not be the real problem. It’s only a reflection or the shadow of the real problem. As John Lee says, “You can’t kill an animal by stabbing its reflection or stabbing its shadow.” So when you’re battling something in your meditation and your approach doesn’t seem to be working, step back and ask that question, “What is the real problem here?” Be willing to sit with it for a long period of time, watching, asking that question to gain comprehension, so that you can see the cause. Once you see the cause, then you can abandon that. No matter what the problem thrown up by the mind, whether it deals with issues from the past that suddenly come screaming into the mind or things that are more related to the present, there’s always a way to deal with them. One of our duties as meditators is to read military history to get some idea of the approaches that other people have taken. We listen to our teachers. All of this has to do with what they call admirable friendship, which is one of the causes for awakening. It’s one of the foremost external causes for awakening. But there’s also the internal cause, which is appropriate attention. That’s learning how to step back and look at things in terms of a problem that has a cause, and learning to be very precise about identifying exactly what the problem is before you attempt to deal with the cause. Otherwise, you find yourself stabbing at shadows and reflections. But if you watch carefully, you’ll finally see where the actual animal is, where the true enemy is. That’s when you can deal with it.

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