Allies

May 29, 2005

Often, the evening chant before we meditate has some pretty sobering thoughts. We’re subject to aging, illness, and death, separation. Our actions are important for our happiness and our sorrow. This body that we’re carrying around is filled with all kinds of stuff. We have to look after it. What does it do? It just grows old and dies. But the chants don’t leave it there. They go on to express a wish for happiness, not only for ourselves, but for all living beings. Compassion for all living beings. Appreciation. Equanimity. These are thoughts to remind us that not all is hopeless, in spite of the difficulties and trials and tribulations of our lives. There is a way to true happiness, and the wish for happiness is not a futile thing. It’s important that we remind ourselves of this every time we meditate, because that’s what the meditation is all about. It’s also important, as a beginning step, to give ourselves a sense of purpose. A sense of confidence, as we meditate. As John Sowat often would say, “Start out with a sense of confidence. Start out with a sense of conviction in what you’re doing.” The skill we’re working on here has been something that’s been handed down for the past 2,600 years because it works. The people who’ve found that it works are people of integrity, people we can trust. What we’re doing is learning how to use this skill in order to become trustworthy people, people of integrity ourselves. So try to start the meditation every time from a position of strength, from a position of mental well-being. If you find yourself feeling dejected or despondent or depressed, discouraged, try to find ways to think that will get you undejected and encouraged again. You can think about the Buddha, you can think about the Dhamma, about the Sangha. Or, if your doubts are about yourself, think about the good things you’ve done in the past. That gets you in the right position to meditate, the right state of mind. In other words, you’re building on the good that you’ve already done. You’re building on the good that you trust in other people. The same principle works in the physical side of the meditation as well. Find a spot in the body where you feel comfortable, where it feels easy to stay focused, where it feels natural to stay focused. Then try to find a sense of well-being there, a physical sense of ease, pleasure. Use the breath. Sometimes it means allowing the breath to be very subtle, sometimes stronger. Try to find a rhythm and a texture of breathing that sustains a sense of physical comfort right there. Stay there for a while. Let your mental sense of confidence and your physical sense of comfort support each other. Then from that position of well-being, let it grow. Think of that sense of well-being spreading throughout the body. You don’t have to move anywhere. Just stay right there. Think of the sense of ease spreading around to bathe the whole body. Like melted butter flowing through your whole system. Once you’ve done that for a while, then you can start surveying the body to see if the melted butter hasn’t melted away feelings of tension or tightness. By that time, you should have developed the kind of focus that helps you melt the melted butter away. We have two ways of paying attention to the body. One is that we improve the blood flow to the spots where we’re focused. In order to keep our attention focused, we tend to squeeze it off in other parts of the body. The other way around is that we squeeze things off in the part that we’re focused on. The second way is not the kind of focus you want to develop. You want to have that kind of opening focus that creates a sense of well-being where your attention is focused, where your attention is placed. Once you’ve developed that kind of focus, then you can move it around the body and you’re not going to cause any harm. Ultimately, though, what you want is a focus that’s opening all around. But to get there, you have to move through the different parts of the body. See what blocks of tension you can work through. As John Lee says in one point, the breath is actually the solvent for the medicine. The real medicine here is your mindfulness and alertness. Once you’ve trained your attention to be the kind that’s not constricting but opening, then you can move it around and use the breath as a solvent to get it through the body. Work through the parts that you can. Once you’ve been through the body a couple times, then you can settle down. Think of your awareness, this broad, open awareness, spreading out to fill the whole body and allowing the different parts of the body to breathe in unison so they’re not working at cross purposes. In other words, what you do is you take your strengths and you build on them. In the same way, you take that thought of goodwill to create a sense of mental well-being and then build on that. You have to remember, as you’re practicing, the Buddha’s not asking you to develop anything from scratch that you’ve never had before. We all have our goodness. We all have our skills. It’s just that they’re not complete. They’re not all around. So what we’re doing is we’re taking what we’ve got. We’re already learning how to enhance it, maximize it. This is an important attitude to have every time you run into a problem in the meditation. Remember, you do have your strengths. Try to build on them. If you didn’t have any good to you at all, then the earth would open beneath you and swallow you up. You’re still sitting here. It means you’ve got some good to you. So you take that good and you put it to use. As Ajahn Foon used to say, “You invest it.” It’s like gaining a profit from some enterprise. Instead of eating up the profits, you invest the profits again. You get some more profits and you invest them again. You find that the sense of well-being you have will grow and grow and grow. If it doesn’t push out all the sense of dis-ease in the mind, at least it gives you a place to stay from which you can watch the sense of dis-ease, both in the body and in the mind, from a position where you don’t feel threatened by it. This is where you can really put to use the Buddha’s teachings on the four noble truths. The duty with regard to suffering and stress, he said, is to comprehend it. Most of the time we feel threatened by it. We feel engulfed by it. We feel surrounded by it, squeezed in by it. So the only thing we can think of is how to get away, how to get ourselves out of that situation. That’s not comprehending it. That’s just trying to run away. But when you’re looking at it from a position of strength, from a position of well-being, you don’t feel threatened. Then you can really look at it to see it for what it is. John Lee used to get some criticism in Thailand for teaching people to be addicted to pleasure. But it came from people who didn’t understand what he was doing. You take what pleasure you’ve got, you learn how to maximize it, and you use it as your friend, as your ally. After all, the Buddha said, “Your right concentration is composed of pleasure and rapture. It’s part of the path.” It’s not that he’s teaching you to be addicted to it. He’s teaching you to learn how to use it as a tool. We very rarely think of using these things as tools. We think of them as the prize at the end of the road, the payoff at the end of a hard day’s work. But as the Buddha pointed out, this kind of pleasure, in and of itself, any kind of pleasure in and of itself, is based on conditions. It can’t be taken as an end in and of itself, but you can use it as part of the path, as a tool. That’s what we’re trying to do here. As in the story of the Ramayana, when Rama loses his wife, he’s off in the forest, he doesn’t have an army, and he’s going to do battle with one of the biggest demons in the world. He gathers together an army of what he can find. It turns out to be an army of monkeys, which may not seem much to work with, but it turns out these are pretty special monkeys. In the end, he wins, because he learns how to make the most of his allies. That’s got to be your attitude as a meditator. You’ve got your allies. Don’t underestimate them. Learn how to help them along, and they’ll help you. Your ability to think encouraging thoughts, that’s an ally. Your ability to work with a breath, that’s an ally. So make the most of them.

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