Monastery Standard Time

September 20, 2005

Life here at the monastery has a rhythm that’s very different from the rhythm of lay life. And the difference is paradoxical. On the one hand, the days seem very long, especially when you’re new here, you’re new to the meditation, and there’s nothing much to fill up the day. In fact, the length of the days sometimes seems threatening. But as you begin to get better in the meditation, you begin to notice the other side of the difference, which is that the days go very fast, because there aren’t so many sharp ups and downs from day to day to day. The days are pretty much the same. After a week, a month, several months, a year, it seems to go very fast. It’s a much slower rhythm. In lay life, people talk about “have a good day,” as if that were the biggest unit of time they could think about. Whereas here, life goes in larger seasons, larger cycles. It’s important for getting perspective on your mind, because the mind has a lot of ups and downs. We tend to ride the ups and downs like a roller coaster. And in riding them many times, we exaggerate them. The ups go higher up and the downs go further down. What we need inside the mind is the equivalent of a monastery. It’s a part of the mind that lives by a different rhythm. It can stay on an even keel, even in the midst of the ups and downs. John Lee gives the image of a bowl full of water taken out of the ocean and sat on the beach. The ocean may have waves, but once you separate that bowl full of water, it doesn’t have the waves like the ocean. It’s got a different rhythm. It’s important that the mind has that sense of the separate knower, the separate observer, that doesn’t get sucked into its moods. Coming to the monastery is one way of developing it. Not only do you work on the meditation, but you just get used to living in a different rhythm. If you can’t live here but can come from time to time, it’s good to get in touch from time to time with the place. Where there is a different rhythm, it reminds you that not all the world is living by the rhythms of CNN, the newspapers, the magazines, the ups and downs of daily life. There’s a part of the world that’s separate, and you want to get your mind in tune with that, so that even when you leave the monastery, you can still have that part of the mind that’s separate, that can simply observe the ups and downs. This is one way in which the training takes advantage of the fact that the mind is like a committee. Oftentimes that’s a problem. There are so many conflicting voices, and they all seem to be shouting all at once, that it’s hard to hear yourself think. Because there are so many different voices, your sense of who you are is actually made up of lots of different strategies. There are lots of little selves in there. You train one of them, and the other selves go crawling all over you. It’s like the old Thai saying about trying to take live crabs and throw them in a basket. As soon as you get them in the basket, they try to crawl right out. As you’re searching for new crabs, the old crabs can go. That’s the problem side of having this committee mind. The advantage is that once you get a couple of members of the mind trained, even if you haven’t trained the whole mind, at least you’ve got your allies in there. You can have that part of the mind that is the separate observer in the midst of all the other ups and downs. That people who sit quietly over in the corner while the other members of the committee are yelling at each other. The people in the corner don’t have to get involved. They can watch and see what’s happening and begin to understand the agendas, the tactics that are used by the different members of the committee. When you understand them, you can see through them. And when you can see through them, you’re less likely to get involved with them. And you’re in a better position to really observe what’s going on. Because the mind does have its rhythms as you’re training it. And they don’t always go the way you’d like them to. You think it should be this way, it should be that way. You’d like to see a nice straight curve going from the lower left-hand corner of that diagram way up to the upper right-hand corner. But it’s not like that. It’s more jagged. And you can’t determine ahead of time where the ups will be and where the downs will be. But you can watch. Once you’ve trained this observer, you can watch the ups and watch the downs and begin to understand them. And then the understanding becomes more important than whether it’s an up or a down. You see the patterns. You see how the mind works. And as you see through it, it becomes less and less of a deceiver. It’s less likely to hoodwink you, to take you in. So it’s important that we develop this sense of the observer that can watch whatever’s happening in the mind and not feel it has to get sucked in, not feel it has to side with anybody. And you do, as part of the practice, want to side with the skillful tendencies in the mind. But when it seems confusing, you can’t tell quite what is what, then you’d be willing to step back and just watch for a while. You realize that sometimes the mind has these long rhythms and you just have to watch for a very long time so you can see through the rhythms, see through the ups and downs. This is your protection. Ajahn Mahaprabhu tells of the time when Ajahn Mun passed away. At first he felt, as he said, like a wild animal with no one to look after his diseases. Because in the past, if he’d had a problem in his meditation, he’d go see Ajahn Mun, and Ajahn Mun would deal with the problem immediately, cut right through it. Now the question was, who could do it for him now? As he thought about this for a while, he began to realize that there were the teachings that Ajahn Mun had been giving him all that time. The one that he had stressed over and over again when anything strange was happening in Ajahn Mahaprabhu’s meditation. He’d say, “If there’s anything that comes up in the meditation you’re not sure about, just stay with a sense of the knower and just watch.” That’ll protect you from getting carried away by all the misunderstandings that can come in the meditation. So this is how you protect yourself. Try to get this sense of the knower that’s living by a different rhythm from everybody else in the mind. They may go up and down, but it doesn’t have to go up and down with them. The waves may be churning through the ocean. The tides may be rising and falling, but the water in that bowl up on the beach may be just staying very still. As you learn how to stay with that stillness, even though there may be waves and tides in the rest of the mind, you’re in a position to see them for what they are. At the very least, you’re in a position where you don’t have to get sucked in by them. Even better, you may come to understand them, why they rise, why they fall, and you find more and more water into that bowl. In other words, more and more of the mind becomes the observer, lives by the rhythm of the observer, rather than by the rhythm of the moods that come sweeping through. So whatever happens in the mind, try to stay with the observer. If you’re not sure which way is up or down, just watch for a while. Don’t be impatient and want that while to be a very short while. Sometimes it takes a long time. Sometimes it takes months to observe a pattern in the mind. But once you’ve understood it, it’s worth all the time that it takes. So try to keep your mind on monastic standard time, or at least part of the mind on monastic standard time. The rest of the mind can go live by lay time. But have part of the mind that takes the long view. Again, there’s a paradox here. The mind that can take the long view is the one that’s very good at being right in the present moment and not rising and falling, with all the little things that rise and fall in the present. That’s how you keep this observer strong.

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