Hunker Down

January 14, 2006

When there’s a Dharma talk during meditation, you don’t have to listen to the Dharma talk. In fact, it’s best to focus 99.44 percent of your attention on the breath. Leave just a little bit for the talk. If there’s something relevant, relevant to your situation, relevant to your meditation, it’ll come right in without you having to send your mind out to focus on the talk. And as for anything that’s not relevant to your meditation, you just let it go. Don’t let the talk be a disturbance. Don’t let it be a distraction. The whole point of the talk is to keep directing your attention back to the mind, back to the breath. It acts like a fence. When the mind starts wandering away from the breath, it runs into the fence, directing you back. Because that’s where the Dharma appears. It’s right back at the mind, right back at the breath. The talk is just shadows, words, names for the Dharma. But the actual Dharma is there in your mind. It might be gusala dharma or it might be agusala dharma. In other words, skillful or unskillful qualities in the mind. But it’s right there in the mind. Good or bad, that’s what you’ve got. And as a meditator, your task is to sort out which is skillful, which is not. Who are your friends inside and who are not your friends? And focus on your friends. Make the most of them. Hang out with them as much as you can. You can look at this in terms of events in the mind. You can also look at what’s going on in the body. As Ajaan Lee once said, the pains and the disturbances inside the body, those are like hoodlums, thieves, fools. Why do you hang around with them? Choose the parts of the body that feel good, the places where the breath energy feels good, coming in feels good, going out. Hang out with them as much as you can. Just as with the world outside, you can’t wait until all the fools are wiped out before you can enjoy your wise friends. You have to just pick your wise friends and associate with them as much as you can. It’s just important that you don’t go around feeding the fools, allowing them inroads into your mind. Another image from Ajaan Lee is like a house, where some of the floorboards are good and some of them are not good. If you’re going to lie down on the floor, choose a spot where the floorboards are sound. Don’t go lying down on a rotten spot. Or with food. Say you’ve got a mango. There’s a wormy section to the mango. You just don’t eat the worms. Don’t eat the wormy section. Eat just the good section. You can’t wait until everything is all good in the body before you can settle down. Which parts are good and focus on those. The same goes with the mind. You can’t wait for the mind to have everything peaceful and good and well-behaved before you settle down. Sometimes you’ve got to learn how to settle down in the midst of a turmoil. That’s when you need the meditation most. So you’ve got to learn through practice which of the thoughts that are actually helpful and which ones are not. Which thoughts you can deal with directly, which ones you simply have to sidestep. This is an important principle. Because all kinds of stuff is going to come up in the mind. After all, we all have past karma, good and bad. And a lot of the thoughts that appear in the mind come from our past actions, our past intentions. That doesn’t mean you’re responsible for them right now. What you’re responsible for right now is how you handle the situation. And as any good warrior knows, you don’t fight every battle. If there’s a possibility of winning out, okay, you put up a fight. If there’s not, you just step aside. You don’t fight that battle. You can’t waste your energy on things that you can’t overcome, because otherwise the other things that you could overcome end up overcoming you. So when things are a real turmoil in the mind, you just hang out in the body. Hang out with the breath. Find which part of the breath in the body feels good, and you just stay there. It’s like a big storm coming in. A couple years back, it was right around this time, we had this big three-day Santa Ana came in one night from midnight. Midnight to six a.m., we had hundred-mile-per-hour winds. Trees were being blown down all over the place. It was a mess. And in the midst of the storm, nobody ventured out. We all stayed hunkered down in our huts. Then when the storm was over, we could come out and survey the damage and figure out what could be done. But you don’t go exposing yourself to the storm when you don’t have to. The same principle applies to the mind. When these things come storming through the mind, you’ve just got to sidestep them. Through your practice of meditation, find which spot is your spot in the body, the spot that you can keep calm, the spot where you feel at home. Learn to treasure that spot. Learn to keep after it. Keep looking after it. And when necessary, learn to hide out there. As that passage on equanimity reminds us, there are certain things where simply the force of karma, the force of things, means that situations are going to be bad. There’s not much you can do about them. But the important thing is that you maintain your equanimity and learn how to hide out. Then come out when there are times where you actually can make a difference. So that you don’t waste your energy on unnecessary battles. The same principle applies inside as it applies outside. If you want to wait until you find the absolute perfect place to meditate, the perfect situation, you will never meditate. You’ve got to put up with imperfections. And then learn how to work around them. The same inside. There are times when you can’t get everything comfortable. There are times when there’s a storm going on in the mind. Well, you find the place to hide out and you stay there. That way, at the very least, the things that you are responsible for and your choices in the present moment are intelligent choices. They don’t create bad ramifications. You don’t continue the chain of negative forces coming from the past. You just let them blow through and then come out and deal with things when you’re in a better position. It’s an important point in the meditation. It’s learning out where your home base is, finding out where your home base is, and then maintaining that. Don’t get complacent. Sometimes it seems, once you’ve found it, it’s the most natural thing. The mind is just going to come back. But if you start getting complacent, it starts getting less protected. And sometimes when you need it, you can’t find it. So once you have found your spot, keep looking after it, maintain it, treasure it. And as it gets stronger, then it’ll be able to send its influence out, both in the body and in your actions and into the world around you. Just make sure that your foundation is strong. That’s your responsibility. The passage we chanted just now, “One who sees danger and respects being heedful.” There are dangers in the world, and a lot of them, the important ones, come from our own actions. When the Buddha talks about karma, he does talk about karma from past lives. The influence of present actions not only right now, but also on into the future. To remind you that if you’re not careful right here, your own actions can create webs that entangle you. So that’s what you have to be careful about. That’s the danger. But being heedful does make a difference. If it were totally determined that you were going to stay entangled forever, heedfulness wouldn’t make any difference. But it does. If you’re careful about what you do, careful about finding where your allies are inside, maintaining them, it really will make a difference. No matter how bleak the outlook may seem at times, the Buddha said there always is the possibility of freedom. Nothing can ever get so bad that it will end that possibility. So always keep that potential in mind and maintain what little areas of freedom you can find in the present moment. It’s by maintaining them that they get strong. It’s like physical exercise. You exercise the body, it gets stronger. You exercise your freedom in the present moment, and that freedom will expand.

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