Practice Letting Go

January 10, 2008

We’ve gathered again tonight in honor of Yom Kippur, thinking of all the good things that she did, the good example that she set, the good influence she had on all of us. So we want to do some good in return and dedicate it to her. She came here back when Ajahn Suwat was still here, and she lived in line with many of his teachings. One that he often said was that all the people in the world really have only one person, i.e., you have yourself. You’re responsible for your own actions, your own words, your own thoughts. You can’t be responsible for other people’s. He said if each of us looked after this one person, the world would be a really peaceful place. The problem is we’re not looking after ourselves. We spend our time looking at the good and bad deeds of other people, trying to straighten them out. As a result, nobody gets straightened out. So the lesson here is that if you wait for other people to get straightened out before you do your own straightening out, it never gets done. Yom Kippur was a good example of this. She just kept doing her duties here, her outside duties, her inside duties, i.e., meditating. Whether people noticed or not, whether there were other people to join in or not, she just kept looking after her thoughts, her words, her deeds. And she became a quiet influence, a peaceful influence on the monastery. This was in line with another one of Ajahn Suwat’s principles. He said, “As we stay here, whether we get other people to come here or not, isn’t the issue. We have to get ourselves. We have to make sure we train ourselves. Teach ourselves how not to cause suffering. If other people join in, that’s fine. If they don’t, well, still, you’ve done your duty. You’ve taken care of your responsibility.” So as long as we have this body we can use, we should use it for this purpose. Realizing that the body is ultimately going to be disposed, you’re going to have to let it go, throw it away. So as long as you’re going to throw it away, you might as well, when you’re looking after it, look after it just enough so you can get some good out of it, i.e., use it as a focus for training the mind, like focusing on the breath. Getting to sit and meditate, getting to walk and meditate, i.e., using it as an opportunity to create goodness in the mind, mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment. Ultimately, it’s going to show its nature that it’s not really you or yours. Think of Yungao on that last day. She put the rice pot on the stove, fully expecting she was going to stay until the rice was cooked. But the causes and conditions in her body were not such that she could. She didn’t tell her beforehand. She didn’t ask her permission to go. She just went and stopped, which is about as clear a teaching as you can get on the principle of not-self. But when we say the body is not-self, it doesn’t mean that you just let it go without getting some use of it. You learn how to let it go in the sense of not being concerned or worried about it. But as long as you’ve got it to use, you’ll find that you can use it. When you want to sit and meditate, it’ll sit. As long as it will sit, then make it sit. As long as it can do walking meditation, make it walk. As long as it can do other good things, make it do those other good things. That way you get good use out of it before you have to really let it go. As for letting go, in the meantime, it’s a question of your attitude. The same with your other responsibilities in life. As you’re sitting here, you could spend the hour thinking about what you’ve got to do when you leave here, or the issues you’ve left undone back at home, back at work. But if you spend all your time carrying these things around, then when the time comes when you really have to let them go, you haven’t had any practice. And it’s going to be messy, and it’s going to be difficult. So it’s good to practice every day, every day, letting things go, as if you’re not going to go back. There was a woman one time who came to practice meditation, what Dhammasetta did in Thailand. She planned to stay two weeks. But the second day she went to see a John Fuhrman and said, “I’ve got to go back home.” So he asked her, “Why?” She said, “Well, I’m concerned about the family, my husband, my children. What are they going to do? What kind of food are they going to eat? Who’s going to look after them?” He said, “Look, just assume that you’ve already died. If you had died, they’d find some way of looking after themselves. They would have to.” So she took that as her attitude and was able to stay for the whole two weeks. Every time she thought of home, she said, “Well, just assume that you’re already dead. They can live without you.” This is the attitude you should take each time you meditate. You could die. So you want to die well. Another one of our John Fuhrman students was meditating one night, and she had this voice come up in her mind. She said, “You’re going to die tonight.” She thought to herself, “Well, I’m going to die. I might as well die meditating.” So she sat and meditated. She stayed on the meditation. Her body felt like it was going to fall apart. All the different elements looked like they were going to go all their separate ways. So she asked herself, “It’s like being in a house on fire. There’s no place in the house where you can stay. So where do you go?” She thought of the space element that’s around the body, that permeates through the body. So she focused on space. And stayed there. What so happened that she didn’t die? Things settled back down and got back to normal in her body. But she learned a useful lesson. When things get bad, you don’t just give up and say, “Gee, I don’t have the strength to meditate or all these other things I’ve got to do.” Your first priority always has to be your mind. That’s your first duty. What you can do to look after the mind. This is how you get benefit out of contemplating death. You don’t want to think about it in a way that gets you depressed. It just reminds you of what your priorities are. What’s the most important thing in your life right now? What’s the state of your mind? How much time do you have to look after your mind? You don’t know. But you do know that you have right now. So take advantage of that. Take advantage of this opportunity right now. This way you benefit and the people around you benefit as well. This thought of death cuts through a lot of garbage in the mind. When death comes, it can’t be argued with. You can’t say, “Well, can we wait until the rice is done?” When time comes to go, you’ve got to go. And if you’ve had practice, then the going is a lot easier. So practice letting go right now. Even if you can’t let go totally, at least you can get some practice learning how to put things down for a while so you’re not carrying them around all the time. It’s like that riddle that John Sowat would often ask, “Is a mountain heavy? How heavy is it when you think of lifting it up?” If you’re not lifting it up, then no matter how heavy it is in and of itself, that doesn’t matter. So give the mind a chance to see how good it can be when you learn how to let things go, put things down. And keep practicing this so it becomes a skill. So that when you need the skill, it’s there. Because you’ve been practicing it every day.

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