Brain Pollution

August 18, 2008

Chandsawat’s way of teaching was often very gentle. Sometimes he’d criticize you and you wouldn’t know until a day or two after that what he’d said was critical. You had to take it back and think about it. But there were also times when his comments were very harsh and very sharp. Let’s put it that way. Each way of teaching was memorable in its own way. When the criticism was gentle, the fact that you had figured it out meant that you’d put some thought into the topic. So it became your own understanding, your own discernment. The harsh criticisms, because he used them sparingly, were often memorable. I remember one time he talked to a group of laypeople and said they were like water buffaloes. That statement right there is pretty harsh. In Thailand, to call somebody a water buffalo is to say they’re really, really dumb. But he went on to explain. He said, “Water buffaloes like nice clean water to drink.” What do they do when they find a nice pool of water? They lie down in it and make it muddy. They piss in it and make it unfit to drink. So you have to be careful when you’re at the monastery. We all come for a nice quiet place to practice, and then we make it unquiet. We fill the air with our brain pollution. Jon Fung once overheard me talking to another monk. This was during my first few weeks with him. I was giving the other monk some advice. I said, “Well, it seems to me like this.” Jon Fung immediately said, “Well, if it seems to you, do you really know? If you don’t really know, why say anything?” All of us have opinions. But the question is, are our opinions really worth sharing? Many of our opinions are driving us crazy to begin with. So be very careful when you’re giving advice to other people about what they should do, how they should meditate, how they should practice. Talk is cheap, especially in our modern society. I was shocked a couple of months back when I was visiting a family. They had the TV turned on for some politician’s speech, and then immediately after the speech, all the talking heads came out, as if their immediate opinions were worth hearing. They didn’t give you any time to sit and think about what the person had said. We get used to this model that anybody’s opinion, whatever comes off the top of your head, is valuable and worth saying. So it’s good to think about Ajahn Fung’s two criteria for speaking. The first criterion was, “Do you know? Do you really know?” The second one was, “Is it necessary right now?” So before you say something, ask yourself those two questions. This fits in with the Buddha’s own criteria for his own speech. One, it had to be true. Two, it had to be beneficial. And three, this had to be the right time and right place for it. So the necessary question is, “Is this the right time and the right place?” And the question, “Do you really know? Is it really true and is it really beneficial?” Ask yourself those questions each time before you open your mouth. You’ll find that the environment will be a lot quieter. Another one of Ajahn Fung’s comments is, “We have two eyes, two ears, and only one mouth. Even our head is giving us a message. Look a lot, listen a lot, speak a little.” Because there are a lot of lessons in the Dhamma that have nothing to do with words, just noticing what needs to be done around the monastery. And a lot of things you don’t have to be told. You may notice there’s something that usually gets done every evening, but on some evenings it doesn’t get done. The person who normally does it may be busy with something else, but that doesn’t mean it’s that person’s job, necessarily. If you see that something can be done, you do it. The lights get set out, you walk back to the house, you see a weed here and a weed there, and you don’t have to be told that it’s a weed. It’s these little ways of looking around you and learning from what you see, listening not only to the words, but also just listening to what needs to be done, being very observant. This is an important part of the meditation. You know that story in Ajahn Lee’s autobiography where he was looking after Ajahn Mun. He was setting up Ajahn Mun’s room every day after the meal. And Ajahn Mun was always very critical. Things were not in the right place, but he wouldn’t tell Ajahn Lee where the right places were. So Ajahn Lee finally poked a hole in the wall of Ajahn Mun’s hut. It was covered with banana leaves. So he noticed that when Ajahn Mun went into the hut, where did he arrange things? How did he put down his sitting cloth? Did he have to turn it around? Which way is front? Which way is back? Where did Ajahn Mun put things when he put things in their place? And the next day, Ajahn Lee went in and put things in all the places as he had remembered Ajahn Mun doing them. Then he went back and sat by the hole in the wall. I’m sure Ajahn Mun knew what was going on. Ajahn Mun went into his hut, looked left, looked right, didn’t have to change anything at all. He just sat down and did his chants. He was teaching Ajahn Lee to be observant, to use his eyes, to use his ears. That’s how Ajahn Lee became a really good meditator. Because a lot of things are going to happen in your meditation that are not explained in the books. You have to learn how to use your powers of observation. So that’s what you want to practice here. Try to be as sparing in your speech as possible, and that gives your mind more opportunity to look and watch and learn. And even if your mind is a mess in the meditation, there are lots of little ways you can pick up merit around the monastery. Noticing that this needs to be done, that needs to be done, this needs cleaning up, that needs arranging. So you go ahead and do it. That creates the right atmosphere, that creates the right environment for the practice. So think about this. As you go through the day, you’re creating both your own environment for the practice and you’re influencing the environment that other people are practicing in. So you want to have, as the chant said just now, respect for concentration, i.e., your own concentration, their concentration. It’s bad enough that you’re carrying around your own brain pollution. You don’t want to pollute other people’s brains with half-formed opinions or just idle chatter. This is why the Buddha stressed right speech immediately after the wisdom aggregate of the path, or the discernment aggregate of the path. The Buddha explains right view and right resolve. The next step is right speech, because both our internal speech and our external speech need a lot of training. It’s going to have a huge influence on our meditation, because that’s both how we show goodwill for ourselves and for the people around us, not by giving them a lot of advice or just chatting them up to give a good impression. It’s by being very careful in what we say. The person who exercises right speech ends up saying things that are worth treasuring. In other words, that person’s talk is not cheap talk. It’s gold coins, things worth remembering, things worth taking to heart. If you look into your own mind and you see that it’s a mess, you realize, okay, that mess in there is not a treasure to be handed out. You keep it to yourself. You try to work on it directly. You don’t want to pollute other people’s minds. You don’t want to pollute the atmosphere around you. So we live here as a community, and we want to make sure we don’t get in the way of one another’s practice. We want our friendships here to be noble friendships, admirable friendships. In other words, our concern with one another is not that we make a good impression, but we want to be really helpful. Sometimes being really helpful means being very quiet, being observant. What does that person really need? And if you’re not sure, well, you just stay quiet and generally helpful in other ways. Be a good example in your actions. When your mind seems to be a mess and the last thing you want to do is meditate, walk around the monastery and you see a weed here and a weed there. Even though it may not be the work period, it doesn’t hurt to contemplate the weeds. Yesterday some workers came through and they weeded the garden in front of the bathhouse, and they left one enormous weed right next to it. It’s still there, twenty-four hours later. Jon Foon used to call this the grass at the cattle gate. In other words, the cattle are kept in a pen, and then when they are let out of the pen to go feeding, they go running out and they miss it. There’s a little bit of grass right there at the post next to the gate. It’s nice, tender, green grass, and everybody overlooks it. There are all sorts of little things that can be done around the monastery, and it’s a development of the right attitude where you look for those things, you find them, take care of them, without having to be told, without having to tell other people that you did it. It’s a little way of exercising the skills that you need as a meditator, looking for the little things, the little ways of cheering up the mind when it needs cheering up, the little ways of chastising the mind when it needs being chastised, looking for those little weeds in the mind that need to be pulled before they become huge weeds, going to seed. Spreading their seed all over the place. You have to be observant in these ways, because that’s what makes you more of an independent meditator. When you notice something, there’s a problem in your mind, and you watch it for a while to see what’s causing it. You try something here, try something there, see what works. Learn to take pleasure in the process of learning. There’s a Vipassana teacher I know who complains that the people all come to him and they want to be told what to do. And then if it doesn’t work, of course, then they can blame the teacher. He says, “You’re here to learn, you’re here to explore, to observe.” And they say, “Please don’t tell us that. Just tell us what to do.” Well, no teacher can tell you everything that needs to be done. What makes you a good meditator, what gives results in the practice, is your willingness to look and see, “Well, what does need to be done? Where are the real problems here?” Learning how to recognize a problem, learning how to recognize its causes, so you can attack the problem at the right place. You start doing this with little things in the mind, and then it starts going deeper and deeper, and you find the roots of larger problems as well. So look at your outside behavior as part of the training. That’s an important way of understanding the right principles that are going to be applied inside. Then you find that your meditation goes a lot better. As you create the right environment outside, it creates the environment inside as well. And at the same time, you’re being helpful to people around you, so that our friendships here do become noble friendships, admirable friendships, to really help one another along the path.

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