Truthful & Observant

July 4, 2009

One of the Thai idioms for meditation is “making an effort.” And, of course, it means making an effort with the mind. There’s the physical effort in walking meditation, the effort that goes through sitting long periods of time, dealing with the pain that comes up. But primarily, it’s an effort with the mind to gain some control over this very changeable mind we have. This one passage where the Buddha talks about the mind shifting around fast like a fish out of water. But there’s another passage where he says the mind is so quick to change that there’s no real analogy for it. And the Buddha was a master of analogies. So this mind can change very easily. If you think you’ve got it headed in one direction, all of a sudden you find it’s going the other direction. And by the time you’ve figured out which other direction it’s going, it’s changed directions again. So we’ve got to find some way of getting hold of the mind. As John Tate once said, “You can’t tie it down with chains.” You’ve got to give it a foundation. You’ve got to give it a place where it can take refuge so it can have a good, solid basis for its actions. The Buddha set forth a pattern for going forth. It’s simply the act of taking refuge. You go to the Buddha for refuge, to the Dhamma for refuge, to the Sangha for refuge. Three times you say that, three times. And one sense it does mean that you take your strength from things outside. That’s the example of the Buddha. If we didn’t have the example that there was someone who could find true happiness through his own efforts, it would be a very daunting prospect to look for true happiness. We don’t know where we would look or whether we’d succeed. Think about the Buddha. He didn’t have any guarantees when he went out, you know, that he’d find what he was looking for. We have at least the example of the Buddha and the Sangha, that there are people who’ve claimed that true happiness can be found through your own efforts, and they’re happy to show the way. Then we have the Dhamma, which explains things. It gives directions to our practice. So that’s one source of strength in our effort. We have good examples who’ve left a very detailed path. And even though we talk about the path as one that you tread yourself, you still depend a lot on other people. As you noticed today, there wasn’t just one person in the ordination hall. There was a whole community, the community of the monks who were accepting the new ordination, the new candidate, and the community of laypeople giving their support, promising their support in the future. Because we are social animals, we do depend on other people. We do depend on one another for good examples, for emotional support, the support of a good example, and for material support. All this is an important part of the practice. It takes the community for people to practice. But given that support, it’s up to each of us to make the most of it, to put it to good use. As the Buddha said, one of the motivations for going as far as you can in the practice is the realization that the greater your attainment, the more rewards accrue to the people who’ve been supporting you. It’s not just you who benefit. The people who support you benefit as well. This goes for all of us. Lay or ordained, we depend on the support of others. We depend on others to make progress in the practice. But when it comes to the actual doing, it’s our own affair. After all, we suffer from our own lack of skill, and we have to develop skill through our own powers of observation. As the Buddha said, “Let someone come to you and become who is truthful and observant, someone who is no deceiver.” And I’ll teach that person the Dhamma. Those are the two prerequisites. On the one hand, you’re truthful and not deceptive. That means you’re truthful to yourself. When you make a mistake, you admit you made the mistake. And you’re truthful to the people you live with. And you have to be observant. As Ajaan Furman said when I went back to stay with him, “Don’t expect that everything is going to be handed to you.” If you’re going to practice, you have to learn how to think like a thief. Look around. Use your eyes. Notice the examples of others. Sometimes they’re good examples, sometimes they’re not. But pay attention, because it’s through developing your own powers of observation that you’re going to see not only things outside, but things inside yourself. Everything that you need to know is already displaying itself all the time. Your greed is displaying itself, your anger, your delusion is displaying itself. You just don’t notice. You don’t see it for what it is. It’s not that there’s some hidden story going on. We’re hiding from the story. We’re refusing to see it because our attention is elsewhere. So you’ve got to turn around and look at what you’re doing. Look at the results of what you’re doing. Be as observant as possible. We make the mind quiet so we can be observant. We practice the precepts. We’re generous. Notice what happens to the mind when you’re not generous. Notice what happens when you are generous. The more generous you can be, the more observant the mind can be of its greed, of its aversion, of its fears. The more virtuous you are, the more you notice. You’re as boundless as you are. In fact, I had a lay student who was very strict with him with regard to little white lies. So I told him, “You want to make sure that everything you say is true, even the things that you think are not deceptive, in other words, things that you say in jest. It lowers the value of your speech.” At first, he resisted this training. He was willing to give it a try. So he became very careful so that not even for the sake of a joke would he say an exaggeration or say something that wasn’t really true. It became a habit. A year or so later, we were visiting with a Dhamma teacher someplace else, and the Dhamma teacher started going off on a riff. My student noticed that because he had been doing this training, the riff, which was a lot of exaggeration and fooling around, really seemed jarring. The more precise you are in your behavior, the more you see. Especially when you meditate, get the mind still so that even the slightest movement of the mind shows itself to your awareness. That’s when you really see where you’re causing stress and where you don’t have to, and what the alternatives are. In other words, other ways of acting, thinking, speaking that cause less harm, that are less burdensome to yourself and other people. You notice it. You see. Even though this sort of thing has been happening all along, all of a sudden you see it as if for the first time. This is why, in the forest tradition, the training is very meticulous. In the case of Ajahn Fuen, a lot of times he wouldn’t explain things. You have to figure them out for yourself. He wanted you to get used to being as observant as you could, because then you would take that habit and apply it to your meditation. This is why the path is both gradual and sudden. Gradual in the sense that it takes time to become more observant, but sudden in the sense that when you see something, it’s not as if you had to dig down deep into something far away. It’s something that’s been here all along. When your powers of observation are up for it, you see immediately. That’s the suddenness of the path. Your ability to observe in this way gives a lot of power to your practice as well. Again, Ajahn Fuen noticed one time that when your views are wrong, everything is wrong, you keep pushing and pushing and pushing, all in the wrong direction, and nothing seems to work. But when you notice, “Oh, this is connected to that, I do this, and this is the suffering that comes as a result,” you let go. You let go immediately. You don’t even have to tell the mind. It sees the cause, and it sees the effect, and it sees how they’re connected. The connection is something you don’t want, and you have an alternative. When you observe that fact, when your powers of observation are up for it, there’s no way you’re going to hold on. This is why being observant is such an important aspect of right effort. With any skill, it’s not just the amount of hours that you put into the practice or the amount of effort you throw into the practice. It’s your powers of observation that make all the difference. You watch what you’re doing. You watch it again and again and again until you detect something you didn’t see before, something subtle, but there, right there, not far away at all. All of a sudden, the phrase that you were playing on the piano becomes a lot easier, a lot more expressive. Your stroke as a swimmer gets more efficient because you’re observant. So these are the two qualities that have to be brought to the path. One, be very truthful, both to yourself and to other people. Two, be observant. Those are the two qualities that make for progress. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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