Like a River Full of Water

February 15, 2010

When Ajaan Sawat used to give his dharma talks during the meditation, he’d usually start out by saying to approach the meditation with an attitude of respect and an attitude of confidence. Because we’re doing something important here. We’re not just sitting here breathing. We’re training the mind. So that it can find true happiness. That’s an activity you want to respect. One, you want to respect your desire for true happiness. Don’t let the world tell you that it’s impossible to find a happiness that’s beyond conditions, totally reliable, because they want to tell you there are lesser forms of happiness. So the teacher would have doubts about the possibility that true happiness can be found. The Buddha didn’t talk in those terms at all. He said, “It can be found, and it can be found through your own efforts.” And where do your efforts come from? They come from the mind. So the mind has to be trained. Because if it’s not trained, it has this habit of creating a lot of unnecessary suffering and stress. So this is our major responsibility right here, is looking after the mind. If we take care of the mind, then other issues take care of themselves. Even if you have past karma, a well-trained mind can help you withstand the results of past bad karma. The image the Buddha gave is of a large lump of salt. He says if you put it into a small cup and put a little water in, could you drink the water? Well, no, because the water would be way too salty. But if you found a large clean river and threw the lump of salt into the river, could you drink the water in the river? Well, yes, because the amount of water is so much larger. He said in the same way, an untrained mind is like that little bit of water in a cup. Any bad thing comes, as a result of your past karma, and the mind is totally overwhelmed. Whereas if your mind is well-trained, expansive, he says, and this means two things. One, that your thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, are totally unlimited, immeasurable. Two, that your mind is not the sort of mind that can be overcome by feelings of pleasure or pain. If pleasure comes, you don’t get worked up about it, and if pain comes, you don’t get worked up about it. If you’ve trained your mind in those two ways, then it’s expansive. It’s like the water in the river. So those are the two things. You want to focus on developing these attitudes. We call them the brahma-viharas, the sublime attitudes. You want to practice in making them limitless. It’s not just that you can feel goodwill sometimes, or compassion sometimes, for some people. You want to train the mind so you can feel these attitudes for everybody, people, animals, everywhere. You start with yourself, but you don’t end with yourself. You think of how the suffering of others doesn’t benefit you in any way, so why would you wish suffering on others? If you see other people suffering, the automatic development of goodwill turns into compassion. There’s something you can do to help those people if you try to help them. If you see the people are already happy, goodwill develops into empathetic joy. Modita is the Pali term. You don’t get jealous of their happiness. You don’t get envious. You don’t feel that their good fortune belittles you or makes you any less. After all, when you have good fortune, would you like people around you to be envious? Well, no. Or resentful? No. Then in areas where you can’t be of help, that’s when you develop equanimity. This applies to yourself, to the people you love, or situations that you don’t want to see happen, but it’s just the way things are. You want to be able to develop equanimity in every situation. So the Buddha has you practice these things in your meditation. Develop goodwill for yourself and then spread it out to people who are close to your heart and then out in ever-widening circles. Ask yourself, “Is there anybody in the world that you have trouble feeling goodwill for?” You’ll find there are people that you really dislike. The Buddha’s not telling you to be dishonest with yourself or to pretend that you have feelings that you don’t. But he takes goodwill as the standard. If you find there are people who just really have trouble feeling goodwill for you, you have to stop and ask them, “Do you benefit from their suffering in any way?” And the answer is, you don’t. And when you wish for their happiness, basically you’re wishing that they would understand the causes of happiness and act on those causes. So it’s not like you’re trying to go around with a magic wand and make everybody’s minds happy magically. You’re hoping that they will understand the causes of happiness and act on them. That’s what goodwill means. Then you do the same for compassion, the same for empathetic joy. With equanimity, the Buddha has you remember, again, the principle of karma. There are certain things that are going to be influenced by past karma. And after you’ve tried to make a difference and you find you can’t, you simply have to accept that that’s the way things are. Not so that you become defeatist, but simply realizing that if you pour a lot of energy into an area that you can’t make any difference in, then you’re wasting your time, you’re wasting your energy, that energy that could be usefully used with other people in other areas. So when you’re developing these brahmavaharas, you want to be as wise and discerning as possible. Because they are a way of developing discernment. It’s not just a nice thought or a restful place to put the mind. But as you’re developing these attitudes, you want to develop the discernment that is realistic, clear-eyed, so these attitudes really can apply to your day-to-day life. Otherwise, you find yourself sitting there thinking thoughts of goodwill, and then you get out on the road and somebody cuts in front of you in traffic, and all of a sudden you’re thinking black thoughts about that person, as if your meditation had nothing to do with what’s actually happening out there. You want to develop these attitudes in such a way that they really do apply to difficult situations in life, because that’s when you really need them. That’s when you can develop that mind like a river full of water, clean, pure, something that you can be happy to drink no matter how much salt is poured into it, because the water is just so much more. The same principle applies to developing the proper attitude toward pleasure and pain. When you sit here in the meditation, there are going to be pains—pains in your legs, pains in your back. And if you find yourself defeated by these pains, you’re going to have a lot of trouble in life. The pains of aging, illness, and death don’t last only, say, for a half hour or an hour. One of the sad things of life is that, especially toward the end, there’s a long illness. Most people with untrained minds, their minds grow weaker and weaker through the illness, and at the same time the pain grows stronger and stronger. So they’re totally overwhelmed. They start thinking about the future and they realize there’s this big blank wall. So the minds immediately revert to the past and they start feeding on thoughts of the past. Many times, if the mind is weak, some thought of something unskillful they did or something somebody else did, they get really worked up. So you’ve really got to strengthen your mind so that it’s not overwhelmed by pain. And again, this means not just sitting with it, but also learning how to understand it. What is the sensation of pain? What’s the difference between the pain, say, simply of the body or of the aggregates, and the pain that comes from craving and ignorance, clinging and ignorance? That’s an important distinction. Because it’s the second kind of pain, the clinging and ignorant pain. In other words, the pain that infects the mind. That’s the one that really makes you suffer. And it’s what takes the pain of the body and imposes it on the mind. Because if there is no craving, if there is no ignorance, then the pain of the body is just there. The mind can be aware of it, but it’s not overcome by it. So on the one hand, as you’re sitting here, you have to have the right attitude toward the pain, that this is something you want to study. It’s not something you just want to get past. You want to study this issue of pain. And that requires that the mind have a good, solid foundation and concentration. Which is why we’re sitting here, breathing in such a way as to actively create a sense of pleasure. That’s the foundation the mind is going to need. Because if its pleasure comes only from nice things outside, it’s going to be constantly running away from pain. But it has an internal source of pleasure, an internal source of ease and well-being. Then it doesn’t feel threatened by the pain in the body. It can investigate it and notice at what moment in the mind, what does the mind do that inflicts the pain of the body and makes it an issue in the mind? What kind of perception of the pain does it have? How does that perception create a bridge into the mind? So try to develop the qualities of mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment. So we can see into these issues. So you learn how to use pleasure. Learn how to use pain. So the pain isn’t something you try to run away from, and pleasure isn’t something you just run toward. You want to learn how to use them as tools so you can gain understanding. The greater the understanding, the more the mind becomes free of the influence of pleasure. So these things don’t overcome the mind. So you can develop that mind like a river full of water—clean, pure. So even though big lumps of salt get thrown in, as the Buddha says, you hardly notice them. That way the mind can rise above its conditions. Expansive, free. So this is something you can do with the mind. The mind can be trained in this direction. But it’s each person’s responsibility. As Ajahn Swat used to say, “Each of us has only one person we’re responsible for.” You can’t be responsible for other people’s behavior, even people in your family, even your own children, to say nothing of the other people you meet in the course of the day. So you waste your time hoping that they’ll be nice like this and nice like that. You’re neglecting what is really your responsibility, making sure that your mind is strong, expansive, well-trained. So make sure that you take the time to carry out this responsibility, because if you don’t do it, nobody else can do it for you. And if you don’t do it now, one, you’re just leaving yourself open to a lot of suffering, and two, it’s not going to get easier as you get older. It’s not something you want to put off. So be very clear about what is your responsibility and what’s not. As the Buddha said, this is the sign of a wise person. You know what your responsibility is and you do it. As for things that are the responsibility of other people, you leave them alone. It’s a very basic level of wisdom that we tend to overlook. But as is so often the case with the really basic teachings, it’s really important. So you always have to keep it in mind.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2010/100215%20Like%20a%20River%20Full%20of%20Water.mp3>