Mood Correction

November 16, 2010

One of the first steps when you meditate is to make sure you’re in the mood to meditate. Because otherwise you waste a lot of time thrashing around before you realize that something’s wrong. Jon Swann often used to mention this. He’s trying to gain a sense of confidence. A sense of conviction in what you’re doing, that this really is an important task you’re embarking on. It’s your only way out of here. Whatever suffering, stress, overwhelming feelings you may be feeling right now, or have been feeling in the past, this is the only way to make sure you don’t have to feel them again. Of course, it may take a while, at least just heading off in the right direction, by training the mind. The Buddha once said that this is the sign of a wise person is realizing that if they’re going to find happiness, it has to come from training the mind. So if you check your mind and see if there’s something lacking in your mood, if you’re feeling lazy or feeling uneasy, if you’re feeling irritable, see what you can do to bring it back into line. It’s like sitting here and noticing that you’re tipping over to the right or tipping over to the left. You want to bring things back into vertical position. So if you’re feeling tired or lazy, remind yourself you don’t know how much time you have to meditate. This opportunity to meditate is a pretty rare one. We could die at any moment. Earthquakes, storms, those are the things that come from outside. Then there are things that come from inside. If you think about the different parts of the body, each one seems to be designed to trip you up at some point. A little bit of that plaque in your blood vessels might tear loose at some point, just start traveling around and get lodged in some important spot, either in your heart or in your kidneys or in your brain, and that’d be it. You have no idea when that’s going to happen, so you’ve got the opportunity now to practice, so take advantage of it. If you find yourself missing some people, remind yourself how little we know of each other, know of one another, even people that you live with. For many, many years you really don’t know them that well. They can hide all kinds of things from you. And so whatever comfort you get from those people, you realize it’s based on a huge chasm that you don’t know about that person. And people change. You change. Other people change. If you look for any solidity or stability there, you’re going to be disappointed. But right here is the place the Buddha says you can dig down, and it may not seem obvious at the beginning that the mind has the potential to be solid. But the potential is there. It’s learning how to discover the good qualities of your mind. And we all have those good qualities. This is another thing you want to reflect on if you find yourself discouraged. There are good qualities within each of us. Otherwise we wouldn’t be human beings. So you want to find those qualities and bring them out. And that’s what we’re doing as we meditate. So your only hope for a real happiness that’s stable, secure, reliable, lies in treading the mind. If you find that you’re angry with somebody, ask yourself, “Who’s suffering from the anger right now?” That person really may be awful, just as your mind is telling you. But do you have to suffer from that? And what do you gain from suffering from it? The mind has some perverse pleasures sometimes when it gets worked up about something, about how unfairly you’ve been treated. But that’s pretty poor food for the mind. And all it does is get you worked up and gets in the way of trying to find some peace and stability inside where you’re immune to other people’s bad points, where they can’t slip you up. So take stock of whatever moods have gotten you out of the mood to meditate, and think in ways that’ll bring you back in. This is an important part of meditating, is learning how to compensate for what’s going on in the mind. Trying to find that part in the mind where you’re the observer that watches things and can gauge what’s actually going on and what needs to be going on. And now you can get from A to B. So you can settle down and really focus in on the breath. Sometimes a good way to put yourself in a good mood is to say, “Okay, whatever’s going on in the mind, let’s stop for a few minutes and take some good long deep in-and-out breaths.” Try to get in touch with this energy inside you to see where it’s flowing well, to see where it’s not flowing well. If it’s not flowing well, what can you do to improve the flow? Sometimes it’s simply thinking. The energy can flow from here to there, and that allows it to happen. You’d be surprised how many times the mind puts up blockades to itself. And those are the only reasons why the breath is not flowing. So take down the blockades. Other times there really is something physically wrong with the body, in which case you have to figure out other routes. It’s like there’s a huge traffic jam. Then you want to figure out, okay, how do you get around that? So this gives you something to work with. Try to make the breath your friend. After all, it is the force of life, and it’s what balances all the other elements in the body. And if you’re not in good terms with your breath, you’re really hard up. So take some time to get to know the breath. Because it is good for the body, it’s good for the mind. As Ajahn Lee says, it’s like a mirror for the mind. Something happens in the mind, and often you’ll detect it in the breath. First because the breath is a little bit more obvious, then your sudden changes of mood, which may be very subtle to begin with, and then they can start to grow if they’re given a chance, given a foothold. So you want to use the breath and work with the breath so that there are no footholds for unskillful states. Because as you get to know the breath energy in the body, you begin to see that whenever a thought lands in the mind and stays there, there’s going to be a little pattern of tension someplace in the body. It might be in your shoulders, it can be in your head, in your legs, your arms. Try to notice where that is. And that gives you a way of undercutting the thought right there. Just breathe through that pattern of tension, and the thought won’t have a place to stand. As the breath feels more soothing, the body feels more inviting, then you find yourself more and more in the mood. Think of all the ajahns who practiced out in the woods on their own. They didn’t have somebody to run to right away whenever a problem came up. So they had to learn how to sit down with themselves and teach themselves. They had to learn how to ease in with themselves, figure out where things are out of balance and bring them back in. And the more you learn how to do this, the more you become your own refuge. You become more reliable. Those good qualities of the mind really do start giving you a place where you can stand. So learn how to read your mood. Learn how to bring it back into balance so you can keep the mood just right. Sometimes the Buddha says you need to learn how to gladden the mind. What can you do to put it in the uplifted mood where you’re glad to be meditating? This can also include keeping your sense of humor. If you get too grim about the meditation, it’s not going to last very long. You recognize some old habits when you learn how to laugh at them in a good-natured way. That can spare you a lot of grief right there. Sometimes the mind needs steadying. It’s been jumping around all too much, and it just needs a place to rest and be really, really still. Well, do you know where your still point is, the one where you can keep your attention focused and it doesn’t put too much pressure on the body right there? You focus in one spot, and whatever energy comes up that seems to be building up in that spot, learn how to find some escape routes for the pressure. If the pressure is building up too much in your head, think of the line from your throat down into the middle of the chest opening up. So whatever pressure is in the head can go down there and then out. If the pressure is building up in the chest, think of it going out to your arms. Patronize your breath. Try to keep your one spot as focused as possible, if that’s what the mind needs, if you need to steady things. Try to get a sense of which spot is your spot in the body. And when you get there and any other thought comes up, say, “Nope, nope, nope, not going there. The mind needs to rest.” And any thought that comes up, say, “Hey, you’ve got to think about this, so you’ve got to do that,” or “You should, should, should, should.” “You should, should, should, should. Worry about this.” Say, “Nope, nope, nope, nope, nope. Just keep cutting away, cutting away.” Those thoughts can be stubborn, but so can you. Other times, the Buddha says, “Learn how to release the mind.” What this means is that if you find anything that’s weighing it down, just keep your mind telling yourself that you have the choice. You don’t have to let yourself be weighed down by this thing. Even if it’s a big issue coming up tomorrow, you say, “Well, tomorrow we’ll take care of it.” But tomorrow, what will you need? You’re going to need as much mindfulness and alertness as you can muster. Where are you going to get that mindfulness and alertness if you’re going to worry all night about what’s going to happen tomorrow? Right now you can develop mindfulness and alertness, and the more you develop right now, the more you’ll be able to use them. So that one trick of the mind which tries to convince you that you have to leave your meditation, that’s an immoral imperative to remind yourself, “No, the mind does need to rest. If it’s weighed down, it can’t function properly.” So any activity in the weighing down of the mind is the same as holding on to things. It’s a physical image. But what it means is that it’s an activity you just keep repeating, repeating, repeating. In the case of weighing it down, it gets to feel burdensome, but you keep at it anyhow. Or holding on to things. Again, you keep repeating this same activity, this same pattern of thought, again and again and again, going around and around. You’re going to remind yourself, “Okay, you’re not going to accomplish anything by one more round, or two more rounds, or a hundred more rounds. You’ve been around this particular thought many times. And if no clarity is coming from it, it’s a sign that this is not the time to be thinking it. If you want to gain more clarity, you’ve got to drop it for a while and just let the mind gain some rest. And again, the dropping here means you just learn how to stop doing that. This can be either giving the mind something else to do, like coming back to the breath, or reminding yourself of why that activity is actually going to be harmful. You sit there and think that particular thought for an hour, where is it going to get you? So this monitor inside the mind that watches what’s happening and can figure out what’s skillful and what’s not, and how to counteract anything that’s not skillful, that’s how you learn to be your own teacher. John Fulton used to say,”If you don’t have that internal teacher, you’re not going to get very far.” It’s like in a first grade classroom. If the teacher’s not in the room, the kids are going to run all over the place. There’s no one in charge. And if they decide to be good, you’re lucky. If they decide to be a little terrorist, okay, there’s no ending the terror. But if the teacher’s in the room, the teacher can calm things down, gain some control. And make sure they actually do their work and get some results out of this. So it’s the same with the meditation. You’ve got to learn how to develop this inner teacher. It’s not just a matter of telling yourself what the technique is, but it’s also a matter of learning to put yourself in the mood. As I would have said, this is one of the signs of wisdom. If you know that something’s going to give good results, but you just don’t feel like doing it, how do you talk yourself into doing it? Can you do that? That’s wisdom right there. And this is how we develop wisdom in the practice, by learning to think strategically like this. We often think of wisdom as being very high and abstract, but it starts from very basic principles. Simple things like learning how to talk yourself into doing something you don’t want to do, but you know it’s going to be giving you good results if you do it. How do you put yourself in the mood? Or if there’s something you do like to do, but you know it’s going to give bad results down the line, how do you stop yourself? There’s nothing esoteric about this, but it can be difficult. On the other hand, it can be done. So don’t overlook the pragmatic wisdom that’s needed right here, right now, because that’s how the more subtle wisdom develops. If you’re not willing to be dumb, you’re not going to learn. This is how we start learning wisdom for dummies. The people who are too smart to learn this kind of stuff, they’ll never get anywhere. So focus on what you need to do right here, right now, to get the mind in the right mood, to generate that desire to do what’s skillful. That’s how you get yourself on the path, and that’s how you keep yourself there.

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