Encouragement on the Path

February 26, 2012

There’s a famous Ajahn in Thailand who is famous for many things, but one of them is that his path of practice was really difficult. It involved a lot of pain. Yet when he gained awakening, he cried, not because of all the pain in the practice, but because he had been so stupid for so long. He was so bullheaded in not coming to his senses and waking up. So when we read about how difficult the practice can be, we have to remind ourselves that not practicing is a lot more difficult. There’s a lot more pain, a lot more hopelessness. At least the path has hope. There’s a light at the end of the tunnel. And fortunately, the tunnel is not dark. It’s a bright tunnel, too. Because you’re doing noble things, you’re learning to be more generous, more principled in your actions, and you’re learning to train the mind so that it doesn’t cause itself suffering. Whether you get to the end of the path in this lifetime or in a later lifetime is not nearly as important as the fact that you’re on the path now and you’re doing good things as part of the path. So always keep things in perspective. It’s the same as John was talking about how one time he was in the forest and his meditation was not going well. There was a little hut there in the forest, and off in the distance he could hear that there was a festival going on in a nearby village. People were having fun. There was music, there was dancing, probably drinking. He felt kind of miserable. Here he was, alone in the hut while everybody else was having fun. And he came to a sense, he said, “Wait a minute. I’m not going to hell. Now where does festival and singing and dancing and drinking, where does that go? Well, that may go to hell.” So at least you’re on a good path. It’s interesting that there’s a similar passage in the Canon where a monk is overhearing a festival. Off in a nearby village, he’s feeling really miserable about himself. They’re having fun, he’s having no fun at all in his practice. And this deva appears to him and says, “Look, there are lots of beings who are going to hell right now who really envy you. You’re heading in an upward direction.” So as we’re sitting here practicing, remember, your path is your path. Other people’s path is their path. And whether your path is going to be easy or hard, you can’t plan it in advance. But take heart in the fact that it is a good path and it comes to a really worthwhile conclusion. As the Buddha said, if you could have an arrangement whereby you’d be stabbed with three hundred spears a day—one hundred in the morning, one hundred at noon, and one hundred in the evening—every day for a hundred years, with the guarantee at the end that you would attain awakening, he’d say it’d be a good deal. And when awakening came, you didn’t feel it came with a lot of pain. It came with a lot of joy. Because look around you at what happens when people are not on the path. They gain good fortune and they abuse it. They gain power and they abuse it. They gain beauty and they abuse it. There’s a quote from Twiggy one time where she said, “Hollywood was into all those horrible things like youth and power. And beauty, interesting, coming from someone who had been through the mill.” And the reason they’re horrible is because people abuse them. There are lots of good things you can do with power. There are lots of good things you can do with wealth and beauty. But most people who have them abuse them. And those are the good things of the world. As for sensual pleasures, there’s never enough. You gain this pleasure. You want that one. You gain that one. Then you want this further one. You think you’re going to be happy with what you gain. But then once you gain it, it’s, as they say in Thai, yang-ang-yang. It doesn’t really satisfy you that deeply. And there’s always the hunger for more. In fact, the more you go in this direction, the more the hunger gets aggravated. And then when you get a lot down, then it’s too much. They were joking on the trip recently. The Bryce Canyon is too red. The Grand Canyon is too big. Parts of Bryce were too eroded. There’s never just right in the world. The things in and of themselves are just what they are, in line with their causes and conditions. But the mind is always going in one direction either too far or one direction too little. There’s never a sense of just right, never a sense of enough. And yet we keep pursuing that direction. And the things we do to pursue those things are often unskillful, and then they create a lot of suffering, both for ourselves and the people around us. That’s the path of the world. The path of the Dhamma, though, involves generosity, virtue, meditation, all ways of doing things good, all forms of happiness, whereby your happiness augments other people’s happiness. And when you see that they’re happy, it augments yours. The happiness on both sides feeds on each other in a healthy way. It’s not that kind of happiness that creates divisions. The happiness is based on wealth and status and praise and physical pleasures. One side gains, other sides have to lose. When you gain wealth, there’s someone else there who’s going to lose wealth. We see all these bubbles going through the economy. It’s not like just the wealth is coming out of nowhere to feed the bubble. It’s being sucked out of other places. The same with status. You gain a certain rank, a certain position, which means other people cannot get it while you’ve got it. This is why that kind of happiness creates divisions in the world. Whereas the happiness of generosity, virtue, meditation, creates harmony. Everywhere you go in the world where people are practicing, it’s very easy to get along with the people who are practicing the Dhamma. There’s a sense of fellowship. There’s a sense of common values that breaks down the divisions of one another. Otherwise it divides you in terms of language or culture. So we’re on a good path. It’s not the case that it’s saving all of its goodness for the end. How long it’s going to take, or how difficult it’s going to be, you can trust that you will acquire the strengths you need as you face the difficulties. When you look at your own mind, you realize there’s a lot of work that needs to be done. But you work on what you can, and as you work on what you can, you develop strength. And that gives you the ability to take on bigger projects and bigger issues, deeper problems. So when you look at yourself and you compare yourself with people who’ve reached the end of the path, you say, “Well, it seems a long ways away.” Remember, those people were once where you are now, and they got where they are now by working on whatever strengths they had at that time. So you work on the strengths that you have right here, right now, and you’ll become a new person. It’s a gradual process, but sometimes when you look back several years at where you were before you started or where you were earlier in the path, you realize that a lot has changed in terms of where you find your happiness, your ability to handle difficult issues, basic sense of well-being, and also that sense of hope, that there is hope in this life. As Ajaan Furong once said, the debt that he owed to Ajaan Lee was because Ajaan Lee showed him the brightness of the world. It wasn’t the fact that wealth or status are bright. It was the fact that even in this human world, it is possible to find true happiness based on the strengths you already have. Ajaan Mun would often encourage his students, you have to remember that most of his students are peasants. One of the basic messages of Thai culture to peasants is that they’re way on the bottom and there’s no hope for them to get up because there are all these other classes of society above them. They lack the education, they lack the connections that you need in order to get ahead. And so Ajaan Mun would often encourage them, saying, “For the sake of the Dhamma, you’ve got all the treasures you need. You’ve got this body, you’ve got your mind. You’ve got whatever good qualities you’ve developed. Those are all you need for this practice. It’s simply a matter of developing them.” So learn to take advantage of the strengths you have. Having a sense of yourself is an important quality you want to develop, which means knowing where your strengths are, knowing where your weaknesses are, knowing which strengths you can rely on. And to work on whatever weaknesses you’re able to tackle right now. And knowing that in the process of working on those, you develop more and more strengths. Your strengths get stronger. All the various approaches and techniques that you develop in the practice get more precise, more ingenious, because you stick with it. So there’s every reason for confidence in the practice. An important skill of being a meditator is to learn how to keep your spirits up. When you read the stories of other people’s practice, remember, your practice may not go exactly as theirs did. And it’s often good not to try to force it into a mold that you read about. Take inspiration. And someday, some of the techniques or strategies that you read about will become useful. For right now, you’ve got to look at where your particular issues are and try to figure out what you can do to get past those issues. Because it’s in developing your own ingenuity that your discernment develops. By using what you’ve learned from other people and adjusting it here and tweaking it there, the practice becomes your own. And someday the results will be your own.

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