In the Mood to Meditate

May 11, 2012

As Jonsu Wat would often begin his Dharma talks by saying, “Put yourself in the right mood to practice.” In other words, don’t anticipate whether it’s going to go well or not going to go well. Think in ways that will help it go well. Remind yourself that you’re doing something really worthwhile here. You’re straightening out the mind. Because everything in life comes from the intentions that you have, the intentions that you act on. That’s what the teaching on karma is all about. Sometimes we think about karma as being this horrible force that’s going to bring us suffering for some reason or another. But the Buddha never has you focus on past karma. He has you focus more on what you’re doing right now. This is why karma is very relevant to the meditation. If your mind is in good shape, then you’re more likely to do the right thing, shape your life in the right way. And you have that power. That’s a good thing to reflect on. Don’t think of yourself as a victim. You’re more the author of events. The creator of events. So here’s your chance to get the mind in good shape. Even if it’s not in good shape right now, if you’re in a lousy mood, it is possible to get out of it. You don’t have to identify with the mood. Think of all the good things you can do. Think of all the good things you can do with a trained mind, and here’s your opportunity to train it. There are so many people in the world who don’t have this opportunity. They’ve never heard of the Dhamma. They don’t have the time, they don’t have the energy. Here you’ve got the Dhamma, you’ve got the time, you’ve got the energy. Right there is something good. The Buddha talks about gladdening the mind as part of the meditation. And there are lots of different ways to gladden the mind. Even thinking about death can gladden the mind. You realize there’s not much time left, but you do have this opportunity to practice right now. Think of how important this is right now. You’ve got this moment. The Buddha has you reflect, “If I can only breathe in and out one more time, I’ll have a chance to practice.” That makes you appreciate the moment. Not because it’s a wonderful moment or it’s a beautiful moment or anything, but it’s a moment with an opportunity. “This breath, this breath, I can practice. This breath, I can train the mind.” That gives you energy. There are times when you’re feeling down in yourself. As the Buddha said, you can reflect on your virtue, you can reflect on your generosity. You may say, “Well, my virtue isn’t all that great.” Well, think about the times when you did do something virtuous, when you didn’t have to. The times you were generous and you didn’t have to be. Those thoughts can gladden the mind. Of course, there’s the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. We’ve got this teaching that was discovered by someone who’s really wise, very principled. He’d attained true happiness and didn’t need anything more for the sake of his own happiness. So after his awakening, he gave his life to helping other people find the same way to happiness that he had found. It’s rare to find a teaching like that, rare to find a teacher like that. Yet here we’ve got the opportunity. Look at all those members of the Sangha. Amongst the nuns are laymen and laywomen who, following the Buddhist teachings, came to awakening as well. Over 2,600 years, these teachings have worked. Here’s your opportunity to put them into practice. So put yourself in the right mood. Then continue it by the breath. What kind of breathing feels really good? Here’s your opportunity to develop your taste for the breath, develop a sensitivity to the breath. This is something else you can do to gladden the mind. You don’t need to buy a lot of meditation paraphernalia. Then you don’t have to participate in a meditation that’s going to be rough on you physically. There may be some pain sitting still. But here’s your opportunity to explore the breath energy in the body. See what it can do for the body. See what it can do for the mind. Indulge your taste in the breath. Do you like long breathing? Do you like short breathing? Do you like deep breathing? There’s an expression they have in Thai of “breathing with your whole stomach.” So try breathing with your whole stomach and see what that feels like. Nobody else has to tell you how to breathe. You can breathe any way you want. Here’s your opportunity to exercise that freedom, to explore it, to see what it can do for you physically, do for you mentally. This is free medicine because it’s the breath. Energy flows well through the body. It helps the circulation of the blood. The circulation of the blood brings nutrients to the cells. If there’s any part of the body where there’s a lot of pain, think of the breath nourishing that part of the body. It may not make the pain go away. But if there’s been any damage to that part of the body or any harm done to it, here’s your chance to heal it. And you find that the frazzled edges of the mind get a chance to be healed as well. So do what you can to put yourself in the mood and then maintain that mood. Here’s your freedom not to be a slave to your feelings. All too often, especially here in the West, we tend to identify with our feelings. This is what’s really us, what’s really ours. We may mistrust our thoughts, but somehow our feelings we feel are genuine. Our feelings are just fabricated. They’re habitual. And just because you feel something really strongly doesn’t mean it’s true. You’ve got to look at what that feeling is going to do. Where does it lead? And if you say that you’ve got a lot of negative feelings, you don’t have to identify with them. You can just watch them and see where there’s an opportunity. With the breath, thinking in new ways, holding new perceptions in mind, to change the tide. Sometimes it takes a while. We’ve got an hour here. So learn to step back from any negative feelings and realize you’ve got freedom to develop positive ones in their place. After all, as long as feelings are fabricated, why not fabricate some good ones? Develop new habits. If you find yourself habitually negative in your attitude, and if having a good mood or being in a good place emotionally doesn’t feel right, it feels false, remember that a negative attitude feels genuine simply because you’re so used to it. It’s like someone who’s been wearing shoes that pinch your feet. All of a sudden you get really comfortable shoes and they don’t feel right because you’re used to being pinched. But only a fool would go back to the pinched shoes. Learn how to adjust yourself to shoes that are really comfortable. Because when the mind is in a better mood like this, when you feel better physically, you are more likely to make the right choices, to see the situation around you more precisely, more accurately, able to evaluate it, and then make the right choices as to what would be the best thing to do, what would be the best thing to say, what would be the best thing to think or feel. Realize that you have these choices. And when you’re coming from a position of strength and well-being, you’re more likely to choose well. It’s in this way that looking after yourself benefits not only you, but it benefits people around you. And it benefits both you and the people around you here in the present and on in the future. You’ve got this freedom. Try to make the most of it.

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