Days & Nights Fly Past (med-fi)

May 16, 2012

There’s a question that the Buddha has us ask ourselves every day. What am I becoming as days and nights fly past? That’s how we gauge our practice. What kind of person are you becoming? The practice that you’re doing right now, in what direction is it pushing you? Is it the direction you want to go? After all, days and nights are flying past. We don’t have all the time in the world. And if you were to die right now, what would you be caught in the middle of doing? Especially on voices of different people talking about what they were doing when they were dying. One I remember was that I was sitting in the donut shop and I didn’t believe that the car would come through the window. I was pretty sure I could make it across that gap. You’d like to be caught dead meditating and improving your mind. Which means you should spend your life doing that. But this question of time, the question of urgency, is one that requires a lot of sensitivity. It requires your full powers of observation. After all, there is such a thing as pushing yourself too hard, skipping the steps. We’re not doing the steps well. When you’re focusing on the breath, stay with the breath and try to be as sensitive as you can to what’s going on. In that sensitivity, that’s where the ardency lies. That’s where the right effort lies. Because you get a better and better sense of how much pressure you need to put on the practice, where you have to push harder, where you have to let up a bit. It’s a sense of skill that we’re working on. It’s not simply a matter of brute force. As Ajahn Fuhrman once said, “If we could push our ways into Nirvana, we’d all be there by now.” It requires delicacy. It requires your very precise powers of observation. You do the steps well. They’ll lead you to where you want to go. If you do them in a sloppy way, you end up in a sloppy place and you become a sloppy person. That’s not what you want. So whatever you’re doing, if it’s related to the practice, try to do it really, really well. Not everything is worth doing well. There are some things you have to do, but you don’t want them to take over. You don’t want them to take up your energy. You don’t want them to take up your time. But while you’re doing other things, you can keep watch over the mind. You can be alert, mindful, ardent. Those are the qualities that make a difference. And you have to gain a sense of the rhythms of your practice. There are times when you tell the mind to settle down with the breath, and it’s very obedient. It just settles right down. When that happens, you can’t be complacent. You have to keep watch on how you can do it better. Tweak it here, tweak it there. Make use of that sense of well-being. Let the comfortable breath sensations flow throughout the body. It’s in line with the Buddha’s instructions where he says that when there’s a sense of ease and well-being that comes from getting the mind secluded from unskillful qualities, you let that sense of ease and well-being permeate through the body. It requires some direction. In some cases, you allow it to happen. In other cases, you have to, in his image, need it through something that you would need water into a ball of dough. That, again, requires sensitivity. If you push it too hard, sometimes you destroy that sense of well-being. So you have to be careful. The effort goes into being meticulous then. There are other times when the mind is not willing to settle down. And it’s all too easy in times like this, in times like that, just to let the mind give up, saying, “Well, tonight’s meditation is not going well. I might as well do something else.” No. You want to figure out a mind that’s not obedient, a mind that is not cooperating. What’s going on? It’s only in this way that you learn about the unskillful qualities of your mind. You grapple with them. And, again, grappling doesn’t mean you just rush right in and try to push things around. Sometimes it requires that you send a few spies in to figure out what’s going on. What’s the issue? Is it the issue with the body? Is it the issue with the mind? If, while you’re sitting, nothing seems to make any sense, get up and walk around. See if that errors out the issue. But don’t give up in your effort. Again, it’s much better to be caught dead in the midst of trying to figure out what’s wrong with your mind rather than being caught dead when you give up. Because that’s a lot of what it comes down to. We’re all going to die someday anyhow. So how do you want to die? Do you want to die in the midst of the effort, or do you want to die having given up? The answer should always be in the midst of the effort. Even if you’re not successful, at least your trajectory is going in a good direction. So whether you’re here at the monastery or you’ve gone back home, don’t make your location an issue. Or, while you’re here at the monastery this weekend, we’re going to have a lot of people coming here, a lot of different opinions, a lot of different ideas. How do you maintain your center in the midst of all this? How do you maintain your sense of well-being in the midst of a lot of more activity? With a sense of urgency, the equanimity that accepts what cannot be changed, and the urgency that focuses on really doing well what you can change, where you can have an effect, and being willing to deal with whatever issue gets thrown into your path. This may not be the time that you want to deal with that issue, but that’s the issue that’s there. So you make the most of it. The person you’re becoming is a person who’s flexible and willing to learn, always willing to learn. If you have to choose an identity to take on as your practice, that’s the good one to take. Not someone who’s already good, who can pat herself on the back and say, “Yes, I’m better than so-and-so.” Those prizes are like the prizes from the Cambodian Academy of Motion Pictures, or worse. Try to be the person who’s always willing to learn, who always wants to learn what’s the skillful approach. Who’s willing to learn to be patient when patience is called for, and willing to be urgent when urgency is called for. Who develops that sense of skill. You’re a craftsperson as you meditate. As we know, craftspeople don’t just rush through their work. You want to do it well. Because it’s in the doing it well that you learn a lot of the sensitivity, you learn a lot of the discernment that you’re going to need. Ideally, you learn how to do things well and quickly. But things aren’t always ideal. So given the situation you’ve got, what’s the best you can do? If that’s the kind of person you’re becoming, then you’re well on your way.

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