Count Your Blessings

March 18, 2013

Years back, I was reading a book on the history of life on the American frontier. It contained a letter from a mother to her daughter about how to run a household. It was, as they say, “Man’s work is from dawn to dusk, but woman’s work is never done.” In the afternoon she did the family laundry, and that included everything from going down to the well, hauling up the water, boiling it, washing the clothes in lye, putting them through the wringer, hanging them out. It took several hours. At the end of the instructions she said, “Okay, take the leftover rinse water, pour it on the plants around the house, and then sit on the porch and count your blessings.” It was that last part that made the whole thing tolerable. Even though life is hard, things aren’t going the way you want them to. Still, there are some things you should be appreciative of. This is an important skill in learning how to deal with difficult situations, particularly in times when your meditation doesn’t seem to be up to the task of providing you with the center that you need in order to withstand the difficult things going on. You have to watch out for your thoughts at a time like this, because they can undermine everything in the world. Nothing’s good. Meditation is no good. The Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha—nothing is any good in a time like that. This is a useful time to remember the image of the committee of the mind. You’ve got some members that are pretty strongly entrenched. They’re the ones who are waiting for things to go poorly and then to say, “I told you so.” In other words, the constantly negative members of the mind. It’s so easy to identify with them as the ones telling you the real truth about the situation, especially when you’ve been careless and things have been going very well and you get heedless of things. Then things come slamming down and they say, “See, I told you.” Well, they’re not there to really help you. That’s their attitude. Think about the kind of people you would be hanging around with who are always saying, “See, I told you so.” You wouldn’t want to hang around with people like that at all. And yet you somehow believe them when they’re in the voices inside your own head. John Lee has an interesting comment. He says, “Our ability to get really negative about other people starts out with our ability to be really negative about ourselves.” Sometimes negativity sounds like the voice of the Dhamma, the heatfulness, telling us, “See, you did that wrong, you did this wrong.” And it’s useful only to the extent that it’s going to help you to do something right and to give you the encouragement to stick with the practice, even in difficult times. One of the most important skills is that when things are difficult, don’t focus on how bad they are, but focus on where your strengths are, the things that are going well. Here we have the answer to that question. The opportunity to practice. There are so many places in the world where people don’t have that opportunity. We have food. We have a quiet place to live. We’ve got this breath coming in and going out. So focus on what is positive right now. Focus on the talents you have, your strengths. Because if you lose them, you look inside yourself and all you can find is mud. After a while you get tired of looking at your own mud, you start slinging around people and things outside. That doesn’t accomplish anything. You’ve got to look for the good members of your committee and do what you can to strengthen them. When you can’t figure out what to do in a situation, remember Ajahn Mun’s advice to Ajahn Mahaprabhu. Things coming up in the mind you’re not sure about, just go back to your sense of awareness. You may say, “Well, I don’t have the solid sense of pure awareness that Ajahn Mahaprabhu had.” Well, take what you’ve got. Work with what you’ve got. It’s only by appreciating what you’ve got that you can work with it and let it grow. It’s like finding little seedlings on your path. You’ve been walking back and forth on the path, stepping on everything, and suddenly you realize there’s a really valuable tree there, one that has good fruits, one that has good shade, good flowers. Something would be a good tree to have. But you learn how to step around it. You don’t step on it. You protect it. You mark it in your mind. And only then will that little sprout have a chance to grow. You may say, “Well, it’s no bigger than the grass around it. It’s no good.” Well, that’s not a wise approach. You protect what little things you’ve got. And it may take time, but the fact that you’ve got something that will grow with time is putting you in a much better situation than when people are not willing to let anything grow inside. So look at where the strong points are in your meditation. At the very least, you’ve got a breath coming in and going out. You’ve got some spot in the body where you can have at least some sense of comfort with the breath. If there’s no place at all in the body when you’re going to be comfortable, as Ajahn Lee says, you’re going to die. You’ve got to have some place where the breath energy feels good and you can hang on. If you can’t find it, think of the space around the body. You can stay with that. Space isn’t threatened by anything at all. There’s that story I told you about Yum Tam. A Chan Fung student who had a voice in her head one night said she was going to die that night. So she figured, “Well, I might as well die meditating.” And she said her body felt like a house on fire. There’s no place in the body that she could focus with any sense of ease. She thought of space. Even around houses on fire, there’s still space. So she focused on whatever sense of space she could master or muster at the time. And that was her refuge. So remember, you’ve got refuge too. Refuge from dangers. Where are the dangers? They’re both inside and out. This is why we have both versions of refuge, the Buddha and the Dhamma and the Sangha, as an example. That’s the external refuge. Because when we take them as a refuge, we can learn how to recognize the outside voices that are not reliable, the voices in the media, the ones that tell you you’re no good, or even the ones that tell you that you’re essentially good, that you can trust whatever impulse comes up in the mind because it’s coming from your originally good, true nature. You can’t trust people like that. You’ve got to learn how to search out what’s good and what’s not inside. You’ve got to learn how to distinguish. And so you need good outside examples. You want to hold to them. This is why we bow down to them every day to remind ourselves, “Look, this really is valuable,” the example set by the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Then you internalize their qualities. You want to be discerning about what’s skillful and what’s not inside. You want to value the things that lead to long-term happiness. The apathetic part of the mind basically says, “To hell with the long-term, I want the short-term right now.” You have to recognize that’s a foolish voice. This voice has caused a lot of trouble in the past. This is where compassion comes in. You’ve got to have compassion for yourself and others. That is long-term. Happiness doesn’t harm anybody. This is what you want. Then purity lies in looking at your actions and learning from your mistakes so that your actions really do fall in line with your principles. These are qualities that we develop by combining heedfulness with our quest for happiness. The Buddha doesn’t tell you to sacrifice your happiness. He doesn’t tell you to throw it away or put someone else’s happiness ahead of yours. He’s asking you to look at the issue of happiness and be heedful about it, realizing that your true happiness can’t depend on other people’s suffering. But he’s never asking you to throw away your desire for happiness. He’s telling you to use it, to develop it well. That’s how wisdom develops. That’s how discernment, compassion, and purity all get developed. These are the things that give meaning to life. Sometimes you look at your life and see it has no meaning at all. Well, you’ve got to give it meaning. You’ve got to give it direction. Because life just happens. It keeps on going, keeps on going, keeps on going. You die and you get born again. It just doesn’t stop. For most people, it’s this blind craving that keeps going. But if you decide you want to have eyes to see where you’re going and make up your mind you want to go somewhere, a place that’s worth going, that’s worth the effort that goes into all this, that’s when you get on the path. That’s the second level of refuge, because it protects you from unskillful attitudes, everything from unskillful views all the way through unskillful concentration. It protects you from the results of the bad actions you could do under the influence of wrong view. And that’s quite a lot of refuge right there. Learn how to appreciate that and appreciate the fact that it’s going to take time. Learn how to keep yourself in good spirits as you’re going. There’s that story of the Englishman who, apparently, was one of the first Englishmen ever to entrust his life to some Native Americans. He wanted to go across northern Manitoba into the Northwest Territories to check out a possible source of copper. This was back in around the 1820s. There was nobody who knew the way there except for a band of Dene Indians, so they agreed to take him on. One of the most interesting things about his account was the fact that on days when they couldn’t find any food, or the days when they were joking the most, to keep one another’s spirits up. So when things are going not in the direction you want them to, remind yourself that you’ve got to keep yourself in a good mood. You’ve got to have compassion for yourself. When you have compassion for yourself, that makes it easier to have compassion for others. You don’t have to go down and find what mud you can find inside it and start hurling it around. The Buddha himself set a similar example. When he was almost killed by Devadatta, he got a stone sliver in his foot. After it was removed, his foot was very painful. He laid down and told Mara, who came to taunt him, “I lie here with compassion for all beings.” Instead of focusing on the pain, he developed goodwill for everybody, compassion for all the people who are suffering. Human beings fall into two sorts. Those who, when they’re suffering, are sensitive to the suffering of others and have compassion. But then, when they’re not suffering, they forget their compassion. And those who, when they’re suffering, all they can think about is their own suffering. They don’t have the energy to think about other people’s suffering. Well, neither way is right. When things are going well in your life, you want to be compassionate. When they’re not going well, you want to be compassionate. Otherwise, if you start getting down in yourself, as Ajahn Lee said, you start getting irritated by being down in yourself, and so you start spreading the bad mood around. Finding fault with this person, that person, the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, the practice, whatever. Ask yourself, “Is that wise? Is that discerning? Does it lead to your long-term welfare and happiness?” You’ve got to believe that long-term welfare and happiness is possible. That’s the belief that sees us through, even through the difficult times. So when your concentration seems weak and keeps getting knocked over by things, remember, you’ve got to use what discernment you have. It may not be your own discernment. You’ve picked it up from other people. But if that’s all you’ve got, well, you use what you’ve got. Count your blessings. It’s good that you’ve had the opportunity. The Buddha calls the things we’ve learned about the Dhamma weapons in protecting our fortress. Even though the other parts of the fortress may not be good, as long as you’ve got good weapons, you can make up for other lacks. So count your blessings. There are plenty there. You’ve got a body. You’ve got a mind that can focus, at least to some extent, in the present moment. You’ve heard the Dhamma. You’ve got an opportunity to practice. That’s an awful lot right there.

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