Travel Light

March 31, 2013

Every evening before we sit, we spread thoughts of goodwill to all beings. Thoughts of compassion, thoughts of empathetic joy, thoughts of equanimity to all beings, often all directions. We do that because it helps get us out of our own personal narratives. If you come straight to the meditation from the events of the day, you’ll be carrying over lots of stories. This person did that, that person did this. Stories in which you were mistreated or stories in which you didn’t behave very well. Not the kind of stories you want to bring into the meditation. So it’s good to get out of the stories. Embrace all beings in all directions. If you get obsessed with your own sufferings, well, there’s a lot more suffering out there. If you’re embarrassed about your own misbehavior, well, there’s a lot of misbehavior going on out there as well. It kind of equalizes everything out. Not that it lets you off the hook, but at least gives you some perspective that, as you come to the meditation, in many ways you’re really fortunate. You’ve got the opportunity to meditate. There are so many beings out there who don’t. You’ve got what it takes. As Ajahn Mun often used to tell his students, when you need to meditate, you need a body and you need a mind. You’ve got a body, you’ve got a mind. In terms of what you’ve been doing with this body and mind for the past twenty-four hours, that’s not the point. You’ve got a fresh start right now. So my thinking about all beings helps take some of the weight off of your own personal narratives. When the Buddha was sick, there was a time when his foot was pierced by a sliver of rock. So he lay down to rest, and Mara came up to taunt him. So you’re sitting there sleepy-headed, moping around. The Buddha said, “I’m not moping around. I’m not sleepy-headed. I’m lying down with compassion for all beings.” In other words, instead of obsessing about the fact that here he was, the Buddha, and he’d been doing all that good working, and still people were trying to kill him, he laid down with compassion. He laid down with sympathy for everybody. So he had all beings in mind. And it’s good, as you practice, to keep all beings in mind. As you think about your motivation, as you think about where you are in the practice, any negative thoughts can get washed away by taking the larger perspective. So when you find yourself discouraged, when you find yourself wondering how much more bad karma you’re going to have to experience, put things into perspective. You’ve got the karma of a meditator. That’s really good karma right there. And you’ve got this breath, this breath, to keep on meditating. And as you’re sitting here with the breath, the narratives can go away. They’re not really relevant. What happened to your last breath is not especially relevant to what’s going to happen to this breath. Time is always moving forward. Your meditation is always moving forward. This is one of the reasons why, when something comes up that can entangle you in another narrative, you want to learn how to cut through it as quickly as possible. And this is one of the tools. Looking at the narrative not as a familiar old friend but as something strange, a peculiarity of this particular body, this particular time. But your mind is learning how to step out of this particular body in this particular time, at least the way this time is being shaped by the narrative. You learn to step back. And then you drop it. You just let it go. If there’s a temptation to go back and figure, “Well, what was it that was so enthralling about that narrative?” It’s got you. It’s one of its tricks for snaring you again. It’s like the person who gives up alcohol and says, “Well, I’ve proven that I can give up alcohol. Now I can go back and drink again.” Once you’ve dropped a thought, leave it dropped. In John Lee’s images of a person plowing a field, you let the soil fall off the plow and you don’t have to stick it in a bag to analyze it after you’ve finished plowing. If you did that, you’d get way down, never get anywhere in the field. You keep moving forward, moving forward. This breath, this next breath, the next breath. Keep at it. And if you notice yourself trying to stick things in bags and keep them to chew over afterwards, ask yourself, “What kind of stuff are you doing?” What are you chewing on? Old leftovers? Like a dog rolling around in something dead that it’s found? This way you can come to the meditation with fresh eyes, fresh ears, a fresh mind. And that perspective of all beings takes a lot of the personal sting away from the narrative of the past day or the past week. All beings are suffering. All beings should be treated with goodwill. Which means, of course, you should treat yourself with goodwill. Do not weigh yourself down unnecessarily. When you’re now weighed down, you find you have a lot more energy than you thought you had. And you find you’re up for challenges that you ordinarily wouldn’t take on. This is how you grow as a meditator. Learning how to travel lightly.

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