The Right Mood

April 9, 2013

Chan-tsu-wat would often begin the evening Dhamma talk by telling everyone to put themselves in the right mood to meditate. Develop an attitude of conviction and an attitude of confidence. Conviction that this is a good thing to do. Confidence that you can do it. So look at your mind right now. Is it in that mood? If it’s not, talk to yourself a bit. Put yourself in the mood because you see things a lot more clearly when you’re in the right mood. If you’re feeling frustrated, exasperated, just grasp at things. Decide very quickly that they’re very good or very bad, whatever, without really taking the time to look at them. Think of the case of a John Lee. That year he was stuck up in the forest. He walked in three days and very soon after he got there he had a heart attack. There was no medicine. The only way he was going to get out would be if he could build up his strength to walk out. And it was during that rains retreat that he discovered the method that we now know as Method Two. It’s interesting to think about his attitude at that point. One of the teachings you’ll often hear in the forest tradition is that you can’t be afraid of death. If they ask you, “Are you afraid of death?” with that tone of voice, you have to realize that they’re teaching that you can’t. Death is a possibility. You have to have a good mind even in the face of death. In fact, that’s one of the reasons why we’re meditating, is to have a good mood even when you die. Because you’ll handle it a lot better. So in his case, he’s okay. If he died, he died. But in the meantime, he was going to figure out if there was some way that he could use his breath meditation as medicine. And so that’s what he did. He tried breathing in different ways, thinking of the breath energy going in different parts of the body. We read his instructions on where to start the back of the neck and going down the spine. And I’ve talked to a number of people who’ve had heart attacks, who’ve had very bad heart disease, and they all say that that’s where the pain becomes most noticeable. It’s the back of the neck. That’s probably why he started his instructions there. Because you look at his later Dhamma talks on the topic of breath meditation, you see that he played with the breath in lots of different ways. The breath coming up the spine, starting from the soles of the feet and coming up. The breath coming in at the navel and going up the front of the chest. He doesn’t talk about that in Method Two, but he talks about it in his Dhamma talks. Different types of breath energy in the body. Some types spin around in place. When you’re breathing in, sometimes there’s a sense that the energy is going from the top down, and other times you’re breathing in and it seems to be pulling up. So you have the presence of mind to work with these different energies, to experiment. Each time you sit down and meditate, remember you’re experimenting. You’re experimenting. It’s not that you’ve got to get it right. You try things out, and if it doesn’t work, then you come back and try them out again. You do your best, but you have the attitude that, “Okay, I’ll do my best, and then I’ll see what the results are.” Too many times we do something and we want it to be good already. If that’s your attitude, you never learn. You do it, and then you look at the results, and then you learn how to judge the results. It’s like being a roastmaster. When you do coffee, you try to get the first batch right because you want to sell it. But then you’re going to have a second batch, and a third batch, and a fourth batch. So you’ve got the time, you’ve got the opportunity to get them better. And if you burn them, burn them. If you burn the beans, okay, you know you burn the beans. You don’t try to sell them. But you learn how to take it in stride. So this requires patience, but it also requires effort and learning how to find the right balance between patience and the effort to do it well. It’s an important part of the practice. It’s an important part of having the right mood to meditate. But you’ve got this breath and then the next breath. Of course, you don’t know how many more breaths you’ve got, but even if you die, you’ll get another breath, some other body, and you’ll have the opportunity to continue practicing. So when things don’t go well in the meditation, try to approach them with a good mood. Remember, you do have your strengths. Look for them. Build on them. That image of John Lee about going into a house and not lying down on the rotten spots. It doesn’t mean you don’t try to fix the rotten spots. You stand on the same parts of the wards and the floor, and then you try to dig out the rotten spots and see if you can replace them. If you can’t, okay, then you just leave them there. But you build your foundation on this image. That’s where you stand. And it’s the same with patience. You don’t think all the time about how difficult things are. You remind yourself that you have strengths. Some things you have learned from the meditation. So you take your stance there and then you experiment. You try to look at the meditation with a level eye, which means that when you experiment and the results don’t come out well, you admit that fact to yourself. It’s okay, something’s got to be changed. And you know you’ve got the ability to change. If it couldn’t change, there’d be no point in meditating. There’d be no point in the Buddhas teaching anybody. When they talk about acceptance as an important part of the meditation, acceptance means accepting where you are and accepting the fact that the results you’re getting are the results you’re getting. And if they’re not good, accept that fact. But also accept the fact that you can change and make the most of that fact. This is how we grow.

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