Your Inner Teacher

October 7, 2013

One of the distinctive features of the forest tradition is the extent to which they make you responsible for yourself. Think back to the time of Ajahn Mun. People would come and study with him, and sometimes they’d stay just for a couple months and then go off on their own. And any problems that came up, they’d have to figure out on their own how to solve them. If they were really insoluble, then they’d come back to Ajahn Mun. But he’d encourage them to try to work things out on their own. You notice there is no single forest meditation method. They didn’t have frequent interviews. So you learn to be responsible for yourself. You had to learn how to exercise your powers of judgment, trying things out. Ajahn Fuhring would say that the instructions very early on were pretty basic and very, very short and terse. When you first started meditating, he was told, “Okay, just focus on this until your mind settles down.” That was it. No explanation of the breath, no explanation of the different ways you could play with the breath. All this other stuff came later. So he tried to bring his mind down, down, down, and it got really heavy and unpleasant. Until one day he realized that maybe “settling down” was an idiom and not meant to be taken literally. So he said, “Well, I’ll bring it back up, up, up, up, up.” So he brought it back up. You learn two important principles there. One is you have to be observant, and two, you have to use your ingenuity. Turn things around, inside out. See what’s really just right for what’s happening right now. So when you’re meditating on your own, and in the practice on your own in general, part of the mind has to be the teacher, but you have to approach this as an experiment. Try to develop your powers of judgment as best you can. This is why we work so much on the direction of thought and evaluation. This is where discernment comes from. When John Lee makes this point that the evaluation of learning how to get the mind to fit with the breath so that they stay nice and snug and they’re happy together, there’s not too much pressure on the breath, there’s not too much pressure on the mind, that’s how you develop your discernment. It’s a sub-verbal kind of discernment, because you’re dealing directly with feelings. But you notice there are little labels there, little sentences. And you have to get sensitive to what’s just right. And you find, of course, that you go off the track for a bit. But you’re sure to notice and then come right back on. That’s the inner teacher that you want to develop. The teacher that sets the schedule and then makes sure the kids follow it, and then begins to notice. Maybe the kids are a little bit too frazzled, or maybe they’re bored, or maybe you’re not pushing them hard enough. You’ve got to learn how to read these things. Because discernment doesn’t come simply from following instructions. Anybody can follow instructions and not really learn much from them. It’s when you act and then judge your actions. That’s when the discernment comes in. So take as your basic motivation, you’re looking for a happiness you can trust. And keep the Brahma-viharas in mind. You have goodwill for yourself, goodwill for everybody else. Compassion for yourself, compassion for everybody else. Empathetic joy, equanimity. These qualities are your safeguard. Because when you make mistakes, if you make mistakes knowing that what you did was hurtful or harmful, those are the mistakes that are hard to recover from. The mind goes back and forth, depressed about the mistake, feeling really bad about it, and then denying it because it feels so bad. The mistakes you make because you didn’t know, those are a lot easier to recover from. Because you know your original intention was good. It’s just that there were certain things that happened in those circumstances that you didn’t expect. So when you notice, “Okay, I made a mistake there,” the problem was not with the quality of your intention, it was just a lack of knowledge. And every human being alive has a lack of knowledge. So that’s something you can recover from. So your best protection is to make sure you’ve got the Brahma-viharas as your basic mode of operation. And then remember those instructions to Rahula about taking your good intentions and then testing them in your actions. And from there, from good intentions, they develop into skillful ones as you get more experienced, more able to notice what you’re doing. Even though it’s based on a good intention, it may not be just right for this set of circumstances. So you remember that, and you remember that for the next time. This is how you train your good intentions to be skillful intentions, because we all know where good intentions go. They pave the road to hell. If you simply insist, “Well, my intentions are good,” and no matter what happens, just fall back on your good intentions, you never learn. The way you learn things is when you realize, “Okay, even just being sincerely good in your intentions is not enough.” You’ve got to refine your knowledge. So you have this willingness to learn. We often talk about the sense of self that’s useful in the path, and that’s the one that’s most useful. It’s a self that’s always willing to learn. Sometimes you have to take some gambles. If something looks right, you’re not 100 percent sure that it’s okay, but it seems to be right, and you can’t think of anything better, you do that. And if it turns out that it doesn’t work out, well, you can’t blame the original quality of your intention. And so you’ve learned. And this way you never lose. So these are some of the things to keep in mind as you become your own teacher. Leave the monastery. Even when you’re sitting here in the monastery, sitting out under the trees, there’s nobody out there to monitor your breath or monitor your mind. A lot of people would like to have a little meditation machine where you can put electrodes on your wrist and on your head, and it would tell you when you’re doing well and when you’re not doing well. I’m sure somebody would like to invent an app like that, but you would never learn any discernment that way. The discernment comes from taking responsibility for yourself and constantly having the conviction that regardless of what the situation is, there is a skillful way of dealing with it. Even if the skillful way means being quiet or maybe even looking stupid in the eyes of other people. We were talking about this last Saturday. One of the hardest things is to take on the role of the quiet person who knows nothing. Because a lot of us are very proud of our knowledge, proud of our intellect. But there are times when playing the stupid person is precisely what needs to be done. As Ajahn Lee said, the really intelligent people are the ones who know when to look intelligent and when to look stupid. So these are some random thoughts on looking after yourself, taking responsibility for your own practice, starting out with good intentions and then learning how to train those intentions to be skillful. That’s a lot of it right there.

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