Be Meticulous

April 10, 2014

There was one evening very early on in my time with Ajahn Phuong. We talked about how meticulous Ajahn Mun was. Nothing went to waste, even little scraps of cloth he would sew together to make rags for wiping your feet. There’s that story of the old pair of pants he found one day on the side of the road while he was doing his alms round. And so when he went and was looking, he picked it up, put it under his robe, and went back and made a belt and a shoulder bag for Ajahn Lee. Everything was taken care of. Nothing went to waste. I heard that and I thought it was pretty extreme. But then I began to realize that that was an important part of his success as a meditator. He was very meticulous. He was quick but meticulous. That’s the ideal combination. When you sit down to meditate, you want to get the mind settled down very quickly. But you have to realize you can’t jump over the steps. Again, Ajahn Phuong told me that when he was teaching meditation in Bangkok, people would come up with all kinds of crazy problems in their meditation, things he’d never heard of before. And here he’d been meditating at that point for fifty years. But every individual has his or her own issues. But he found that the problems usually came from skipping any one of those seven steps in Ajahn Lee’s method, too. So even though you find there are times when you’re meditating and your mind can settle down very quickly and you can skip over a lot of the steps, at least once a day, make sure that you go through the steps very meticulously. Try to check the breath energy in all parts of the body that you can manage. Try to get everything flowing together well. Because otherwise you get sloppy. And then you get jittery. And you get careless. And when you get sloppy and careless, things begin to disintegrate. And then you’re left back with nothing at all, as if you’d never meditated. So as you’re settling in, think about the length of the breath, how the breath energy is flowing in the different parts of the body. If you find there are areas that you can’t get to flow well, work around them. Establish a beachhead in the areas that can be made to be comfortable. And then from those parts of the body, look at the parts that seem to be blocked off. This is where you have to be patient. You have to be gentle. If you barge right in, those parts will probably repel you and push you back. So when you’re meticulous, it means you pay very careful attention to what you’re doing. And you have in mind certain steps, so that when the meditation begins to disintegrate, you can go back to square one and try not to be impatient. Impatience goes together with another problem, which is boredom. You get the mind to settle down for a while, and then something inside says, “Okay, that’s enough,” and you’re out. Well, is it really enough? You have to test it. One way is to say, “Okay, I want to really sit down and meditate and be still for long periods of time.” They talk about people meditating and getting their mind in concentration for hours at a time. Why are you suddenly deciding you have enough to even go right back? Because what’s happened, of course, is that little voice has moved in and it pushed you. Before you realize what happened, you’re out. You have to question that voice. One way to question it is to remind yourself, “Well, if you actually have had enough concentration practice, then it’s time to do a little analysis.” Analyze something you feel some greed for, something you feel angry about, something you have some lust for. Start going through the body, piece by piece by piece. Think of all the different parts of the body. Sometimes you find, “Oh, the mind doesn’t want to do that. That’s work.” And it goes back into concentration, which is a sign, of course, that you didn’t have enough concentration. If you find that it’s ready to do that kind of work, okay, let it do the work. But keep an eye out for when the mind starts getting dull again, when your analysis isn’t all that sharp. Then you know you’ve got to go back into concentration. The concentration is like food for the mind. You need nourishment. It’s when that little voice comes in and says, “Okay, enough. Learn how to recognize.” It’s just the voice of impatience coming from the other end. We’re impatient when we go into concentration. We’re impatient when we go out. In both cases, it’s because we don’t have that principle of being meticulous under control. John Fung had a student one time who was practicing contemplation of the body. He told her to visualize taking the hair off of her head. And so she, within a few seconds, had stripped, in her imagination, stripped all the hair off her head. And he said, “That’s too fast. You couldn’t take it off in handfuls but then plant it back in again, one strand at a time.” You have to have that same attitude of being meticulous with the breath, or whatever your meditation object is. Meticulous in getting into concentration, meticulous in maintaining your concentration. And meticulous in putting it to use. If you find that you’ve lost your concentration, go back and just start from step one and then step two and then step three. Be very patient. It’s easy to get complacent when you find that it’s easy to get the mind to settle down. It’s pretty quick, and things start getting a little loose. You start taking it for granted. You can never take anything in the meditation for granted. You have to protect it very carefully. It’s the complacency that allows things to disappear. If you’re going through a rough patch in your life, that’s the time when you really need to meditate. I don’t know how many people have told me that they were going through a rough patch, either at work or in the family, and they just didn’t have the energy to meditate. It’s like saying you’re too sick to take medicine. When things are difficult, you really have to be careful with the mind. As that book on learning how to swim that we have here at the monastery, we have it not because the monks have plenty to swim, but because it’s really good. I’ve been talking about how to practice learning how to swim, how you go about learning a skill. When you’re practicing, you’ll find there are days when you don’t have much energy, but then you have to be very meticulous about maintaining your form. You may do fewer laps than normal. But you have to learn how to hold the body in a proper way and make sure that even if you do just a little bit of practice, you’re holding the body in the proper way. It’s the same with meditation. How do you hold the mind with a breath, even when you don’t have much energy? Make sure what meditation you do, do, is in the proper form. Be meticulous about the steps. Then that care for the little things will pay off. It’s like the old story of the mouse and the lion. The lion catches the mouse and the mouse says, “Please, please, let me go. Maybe someday I’ll be able to save your life, too.” The idea amuses the lion so much that he lets the mouse go. One day when the lion is caught in a net, the mouse comes along and can eat through the strings of the net, freeing the lion. Don’t overlook the little things, because sometimes they can set you free.

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