Instruct, Urge, Rouse, Encourage

December 31, 2014

In the temple murals in Thailand, when they draw pictures of time, it’s a big monster eating. And so Thay is saying that time eats itself as it eats up the beings of the world. Where is yesterday? Where is the week before? They’re all gone. Time has eaten itself up. And it’s eating us up, too. A new year is coming, and we don’t get younger with the new year. The image they have of the old year is an old man and the new year is a baby. But for us, it’s the other way around. We’re going to be older. And for some of us, that means we’re going to be stronger. And for a lot of us, though, it means we’re going to be wearing out. The body’s going to be wearing out. Our senses are going to get dulled. So where can we find something that’s not affected by all this time? We have to look inside. That’s where we’re sitting here meditating, to see what there is inside us that can be touched by the mind that is special, that is not affected by time. And it’s something we should all be looking for, because as aging encroaches, it brings illness and ultimately it brings death. And what are you going to do so that the mind is not affected by these things, so it doesn’t have to suffer from them? You’ve got to find something good inside. And it starts out by having the right attitude. Having the right understanding of things is that the things around us that we tend to hold on to, that we latch on to, are not going to provide us the happiness that we think they do or think they will. We’ve got to look someplace else. That’s the first part of the Buddhist teachings. They often say that when the Buddha was giving a Dhamma talk, he would do four things. He would instruct, he would urge, he would rouse, and he would encourage people. The instruction is basically telling us what the nature of happiness is, what the nature of suffering is, where happiness comes from, where suffering comes from. It helps us get our views straight, so we have a better idea of what’s really important in life. And it’s the quality of the mind that’s what’s really important, because that’s going to make all the difference in the world. And once he starts talking about the difference in the world, that’s when he starts urging you. Make a difference. Make a difference for something good. Look at yourself. See where your strong points are. See where your weak points are. Build on your strong points. And really take this seriously, this issue of suffering versus happiness. Because when you think about it, everything we do is for the sake of happiness, pleasure, ease, security. And so it only makes sense that we should make an effort in the right direction. One of the images they use is of investing, developing the wealth of the mind rather than outside wealth. And New Year’s Eve is a good time to take stock. What is your inner wealth? Where are your strong points right now? Where are your weak points? How can you take advantage of your strong points so that you can bring the weak points up to par? Some of us, our discernment is better than our concentration. For others, our concentration is better than our discernment. How do you use your strong point to strengthen your weak point? Some of us are very meticulous. Some of us are not so meticulous, but we have more active imagination. All these things can be used if you learn how to use them well. And you do want to make a difference, because if you don’t do this, time just slips through your fingers as it eats your fingers away. So you have the opportunity to make a difference. Take advantage of it. That’s the urging. Rousing is reminding you of what happens if you don’t. Life is very uncertain, and what happens after life is very uncertain as well. The Buddha compares it to throwing a stick up into the air. Sometimes the stick will land on this end, sometimes it’ll land on that end, sometimes it’ll land splat in the middle. And you have no idea what your past karma is from prior to this lifetime. So you have no idea how safe you are, how confident you can be that you’ll come right back to another chance to practice the Dhamma. You think about all the beings of the world wandering around who don’t have a chance to hear the Dhamma at all. Do you want to be one of those? And how long does it take before you get back to the Dhamma? So use those thoughts to rouse yourself. Then finally there’s encouragement. You have to remind yourself that this is something we can do. All the things the Buddha talks about are things that human beings can do. We’ve had a human birth. We’ve got human capabilities. As he said, if people couldn’t develop skillful qualities, he wouldn’t teach them to develop skillful qualities. If they couldn’t abandon unskillful ones, he wouldn’t teach it. But this is something we can all do, which sounds fine in the abstract, but it’s also important, especially when you’re getting discouraged, to think about where your strong points are still now. And remind yourself not to listen to the members of the committee that are destructive and going to tear you down. When you listen to the Dhamma talks of the Ajahns from Thailand, a large percentage has to do with “Don’t let yourself get discouraged.” You see other people practicing faster than you. That’s their business. It’s none of yours. And what you see on the outside doesn’t really tell you what’s going on in the inside. You may have some things inside that they don’t have. And nothing can get in the way of your practice, quite like the decision, “Okay, I’m not up for this.” You always have to be able to encourage yourself. Because these four types of teachings—the instruction, the urging, the rousing, and the encouraging—it’s good to have it from the Buddha, it’s good to have it from other people, from teachers, but it’s also good to be able to do it for yourself. This is one of the distinctive features of the forest tradition. Ajahn Mun would send his students out to all kinds of places where they had to fall back on what? They had to fall back on themselves. And we read about the successes they had, but sometimes it would be more encouraging to read about the fact that they had long periods of time when things weren’t working, and yet they were able to pull themselves together. And their ability to pull themselves together was nothing really superhuman. They were simply taking stock of the fact that here’s their chance to make a difference. And if you don’t make a difference, things can get pretty bad. All you have to do is just look around you and see all kinds of suffering. If you look in your own heart, you’ll see a lot of suffering. Isn’t it time you decided, “Okay, I’m not going to listen to the negative voices. I’m going to do what I can”? You can encourage yourself. Make a little progress. Don’t be too quick to come down hard on yourself and say, “It’s just a little bit of progress. It doesn’t really matter. Tomorrow your mind’s not going to settle down again.” The fact is that you’ve got something going. You want to learn how to value that, protect it, try to observe it. When it goes well, how did it go wrong? When it didn’t go well, what were you doing that day? That’s one of the things that Jon said. He even asked himself, “What were you eating that day? What had you done up to the point where you’re meditating?” Try to observe cause and effect, because that’s all we’ve got. That’s how the Buddha came to awaken himself, by observing cause and effect in his own actions. He tried out all different kinds of approaches. One thing, however, that he never went for was the idea that your actions don’t make a difference or that you can’t do it. Those two thoughts he just ruled right out. They would never be of any help. You’ve got to go on the principle that this is something that can be done, and it’s simply a matter of figuring out what you still have to develop and how you can use your strengths in order to bring everything else in the mind and along. So as we face a new year, you can ask yourself, “What do you want out of the new year?” The wish that’s on everybody’s lips is “Happy New Year.” Happiness comes from your actions. Where do your actions come from? It comes from your mind. What can you do to ensure that your mind is going to be the kind of mind that knows enough, through the instructions, as to what to do? It can urge itself and rouse itself and encourage itself, so it can learn in more detail. The instructions can only take you so far. It’s through your own efforts that you develop skill here. John Lee’s examples include learning how to weave a basket, learning how to make clothing, how to make clay tiles. These are manual skills where you do something and then you learn from what you’ve done. If it didn’t work out, let’s go back to the drawing board and figure out how things could be done better the next time. That’s where the real knowledge comes from. That’s why, as John Lee pointed out, the quality of ardency in your practice is what really gives rise to discernment. You can urge and rouse and encourage yourself, “Let’s do this right. Let’s do this better. If we can’t get all the way to right yet, we’ll at least get it to better.” And it may be inching its way there or making great strides. That’s not the issue. The issue is that you’re going in the right direction. Don’t let anything push you aside, off the track. Don’t let things outside of you get bad enough to make sure they don’t get into your own mind. Even though the committee may be divided, you want to make sure that at least one part of that committee is focused on going in the right direction. Then you do everything you can to straighten that part of the mind out, strengthen that mind. Because that’s what’ll see you through. (waves crashing)

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