Meditate While You Work

February 25, 2015

John Foong once told me that when he was a young monk, he stayed away from construction projects. And that John Lee never criticized him for it. But then came the celebration of twenty-five centuries of Buddhism at Watasokaram, and they were going to need to do a lot of construction. Not only getting the permanent construction down, but also the temporary stuff, shelters for all the people who were going to come. One evening, John Lee turned to John Foong and said, “If you don’t help me, I’m going to die.” That’s when John Foong realized he was going to have to pick up his hammer. He said, “Well, there’s merit in construction, there’s merit in work, if it’s done for the right purpose and done with the right attitude.” He said, “So who cares if I die with a hammer in my hand?” Of course, he didn’t die with a hammer in his hand. But it’s that comment on the right attitude that’s really important. We’re going to have some construction work here. You probably saw the lumber in the truck. And as I said this morning, don’t look at the construction as a time just for construction. However you want to help, make it part of your practice. In other words, the breath is always there, and the state of your mind. This means you’ve got to try to keep things centered in the body with your breath as you’re working. When we were building the jetty at Vatamsa Thet, someone actually put up a sign. We had some engineers, and one of them came up with this enormous “Bhutto” sign and red lights. It would flash back and forth, “Bhutto, Bhutto.” They put it up while they were doing the cement pouring. They used it only once. Everybody found it distracting. Spend all your time looking at flashing lights outside, even if they’re saying “Bhutto.” You’ll find that your body pulls you out of your breath. So whatever work you’re doing, make sure that it stays with the body, with the breath. And you’ll find that you have strength. The people who worked on the jetty said that they’d never worked that hard in their lives before, and yet they didn’t feel tired. As long as they were working and staying centered, they had the energy to keep going. Keep it up, keep it up. Sometimes they’d work all night long. In Thailand, of course, the best time to pour cement is not during the day when it’s hot. It’s at night. People would then rest during the day. But the work was always done at a pace that people could maintain. This is another thing you have to watch out for when you’re working on a project like this. Rest every now and then. When you find that your practice is getting frazzled, don’t feel bad about taking a day off. Always make sure that the mind comes first. The state of the mind, the state of your concentration, these are things that you want to maintain as much as you can. While you’re away from the work, you want to learn how to put it down. Just as soon as you put the hammer down, you put down all your thoughts about the work. Of course, there’ll be things you have to think about, and this is when it’s useful to remember that rule of thumb. When you’ve got an hour to meditate and there are some things you need to think through, give yourself fifty minutes of no thought about anything but the breath, anything but your concentration. Then save the last ten minutes for thinking through whatever needs to be done. If you’re meditating a little too much, you’ll have a piece of paper and a pen. But don’t pick up the pen until toward the end of the session, because your best thinking comes after the mind has been quiet. This is the whole principle of why we do concentration practice for the sake of discernment. It is possible to think things through and push out some kind of answer when the mind isn’t really well concentrated, but it’s not going to be as good as it would have been when the mind has been still, when it’s been quiet, centered, has a big open space inside. So that answers that might not have come up, otherwise will be able to come up. So the time of work is not a time to put your concentration aside. It’s actually a time to really test your concentration. It’s a time to ratchet up your practice to prove to yourself that, yes, you can keep the mind centered and you can maintain a sense of momentum. Again, remember Ajaan Fuang’s comment that you don’t want your day to be chopped up into little pieces. A time for this, a time for that. Everything is time for practice. Everything is time to be with the breath, because the breath is always there, coming in and going out. All the Ajaans have commented on how people would come to the session and say, “I don’t have time to meditate. I’ve got work to do, I’ve got a family to raise, whatever.” And you’d say, “When you’re working and raising a family, do you have time to breathe?” “Of course.” “Okay, then you have time to be with the breath.” That means moving your center of gravity into the breath, into the concentration, and not out in the work that you’re doing outside. In that way, the jobs, whether it’s construction work or work in the kitchen or work around the orchard, whatever the jobs are, whatever your tasks are, they actually become part of the practice. We tend to think of the practice as being what you do when you sit with your eyes closed or you’re doing walking meditation, but there’s a lot more to it than that. We’re developing qualities. That’s what the word meditation in Pali means, bhavana. And there are all those paramis, the perfections. I remember when we were first getting ready to do work on the jetty, there was an old monk staying there. As soon as he saw the construction work was coming, he said, “I’ve got to get out of here.” And John Fueng was coming and said, “Well, you can go if you want. As for me, I don’t have enough perfections yet. I’ve got to work on those.” That really hit me, because I must admit, I wasn’t looking forward to the construction work either. But there is that other element of the practice. It’s not just concentration. There’s the persistence, dedication, determination, patience, equanimity. These are important things to develop as well. So remember, we’re training the mind all around. It’s an all-around practice, where the quality of the mind is what comes first. So always give that your top priority.

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