Lighten Your Load

April 3, 2015

John Foong once told the story of when he was with the John Lee. A group of laypeople wanted to go out in the forest. They were going to take a train from Bangkok up to Lopburi. When they arrived at the train station in Bangkok, John Foong knew that if you went with the John Lee, you had to travel lightly. So he’d taken just a few things along. But a lot of the laypeople came with two or three bags. I guess they thought that once they got to Lopburi, they’d have porters carry the bags into the jungle for them. And John Lee took one look at their bags and just started walking down the railroad track. He didn’t get on the train. Well, if the John is walking, everybody else has to walk. And pretty soon the people were complaining, “Why are you making us walk? The load is so heavy.” And John Lee said, “Well, if it’s heavy, put it down.” So one by one they stopped and sorted out their bags. It was back in the days when on either side of the railroad track there were these lotus ponds. Anything that wasn’t necessary, they threw into the lotus ponds. Even some of the bags got thrown into the lotus ponds. By the time they got to the next station, at some scene, everybody just had one bag. That’s when the John Lee let them get on the train. The lesson is, if you want to travel far, you have to make sure you have a light load, which is what we’re trying to do as we meditate, is lighten our load. When you get sensitive to the breath energy in the body, you begin to release it. You realize that every thought you have causes a little bit of tension someplace in the body. That’s the little marker you have in the present moment to help keep that thought in mind. So if you’re weighed down by your thoughts, try to find out where in the body that little pattern of tension is. It might be around the head. Sometimes it’s in unexpected places, in your hands, in your feet. It might be someplace in your stomach, in your back. Wherever it is, as soon as you sense it, relax it. And if you’re not sure about where it is, you just systematically go through the body. Start with your hands, work up your arms to the shoulders, and then start with your feet, working up the feet to the legs, the torso, just relaxing, relaxing, relaxing all the different muscles you can sense. You’ll find that the body feels a lot lighter, and your mind is a lot less weighed down, too. This is one of the ways we build up our endurance, as we begin to see that there are lots of ways where we are weighing ourselves down. And then all it takes is a leaf to fall off a tree on top of us, and we collapse. In other words, other people do things or say things that we don’t like. And even though they’re words, they’re hardly just a breath of air. The mind takes them on, and it’s a lot more than just a breath. It becomes a big anvil in your mind that weighs you down. And then all the thoughts that cluster around on top of it. Then you find it really hard to do the right thing. The right things you know are right, to have the strength to do what you know you should be doing. So look to see where you’re weighing yourself down and figure out some way to lift yourself back up. Often it’s just removing the weight, because you find that the mind has a lot more stamina than you’d otherwise expect. When you’re not weighing it down all the time, this is one of the reasons why the Buddha focused on the stress and the suffering in the four noble truths. He talks about two kinds of stress, you know. There’s the stress in the three characteristics, which is just the stress of the fact that things arise and pass away, and they come together because of causes and conditions, and those causes and conditions are unstable. You’re just holding things together. It creates a fair amount of stress. But that stress on its own doesn’t weigh down the mind. Because the events in the mind arise and pass away, things outside arise and pass away. There’s no real reason why things outside arising and passing away should weigh on the mind. But the mind has its own other level of stress, which is when it feeds on things. That’s the stress that comes from craving and clinging and ignorance. That’s what the Buddha taught us to cure. Because once we can cure that, then there’s nothing to weigh the mind down. So look to see where you’re, as Ratabala says, a slave to craving. What cravings are you holding onto that are going to weigh you down? And if you can’t dig them out and get rid of them, at the very least, learn how to question and kind of explode them as you go through. Go through the body and remove all the bases for any thoughts to arise. Keep scanning through the body again and again and again, letting things relax, relax, relax. Don’t slump over as you do this. Try to find a way in which you can relax and you keep your spine straight. You find you should sit through things and endure things that you otherwise wouldn’t be able to do. The forester chants say there’s a quality of the mind that just endures, regardless. If it weren’t for that quality, all the suffering we’ve had throughout life would just weigh us down, make the mind break. But the mind just keeps on knowing, knowing, knowing, knowing, knowing, regardless. That’s the part that endures, and that’s the part you want to get rid of. That’s the part you want to get in touch with. Because when things are difficult, a lot of the difficulty comes from the chatter in your mind. That becomes a weight. And then you think about, “How much longer do I have to endure?” And that becomes a further weight. But if you can learn how to identify just with the part of the mind that just isn’t aware—there’s this, and there’s this, and there’s this—but the awareness isn’t any of those things, you find that those things do arise and pass away, and they don’t have to weigh down the mind. So try to get in touch with that part inside yourself. This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath, because the breath is right next to that part of the mind. So that whatever arises that could place a weight on the mind, just watch it pass, pass, pass. And you’ll find that that part of the mind that can endure, that’s always enduring anyhow, doesn’t need much more help than that. And if you do find yourself falling for the kinds of thoughts that weigh you down, and simply relaxing the body doesn’t work well, try that other technique from that other story we know. People traveling a long distance. There was an Englishman back in the 1820s who wanted to go to someplace up in the Northwest Territories. He was stationed in Churchill, I guess it is, on the Hudson Bay. He’d heard of a copper deposit that was up there, and he wanted to check it out. He wanted to see if something could be developed. But there was no way he knew how to get there. It turned out there were some Dene Indians who were going that way, so they volunteered to take him along. It was the first time an Englishman had entrusted himself to some of the locals. And as they were going along, of course, they hunted to feed themselves along the way. And there were some days when they got a good catch, and other times there was nothing. They’d cinch up their belts a little bit, and those were the days when they would joke the most and keep themselves in a good mood. So it’s learning how to use not just bodily fabrication to reduce the weight on your mind, but also some of your verbal fabrication. Learn how to talk to yourself in a way that can step back from the situation. And see the humor. Get your inner complaints into perspective. Because the difficulties in life are bad enough as it is, why do we have to add more on top of them? This is what the meditation is all about. This is what the practice is all about. It’s about seeing where we’re weighing the mind down with the things that we think we like or the activities we think we have to do. But they’re really an unnecessary weight. You can see that it’s often the things that you are aiming at, that you want the most, that are putting the biggest weight on the mind. And you can see that it’s unnecessary. That’s when you can lift off the load. You don’t even have to lift it. It floats away.

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