When You’re Down on Yourself (outdoors)

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We make up our minds we’re going to stay with the breath. And then we forget. And then we remember again. And what you do when you remember again is important. To find the right balance between being firm with yourself, you’ve got to get back, but not harsh. If you’re harsh every time you remember your way from the breath, you won’t want to come back to the breath the next time you want to forget longer. So you have to have what’s called a matter-of-fact attitude. If the more recriminations, the more commentary you have afterwards, the harder it’s going to be to be with the breath. So just get back. If it happens again, get back again. Try to have a quick recovery time. This principle applies all throughout the practice. When you’re found that you’ve broken a precept or almost broke a precept, as the Buddha said, a lot of remorse is not going to undo the mistake. Just recognize that, yes, it was a mistake. And spread a lot of goodwill to yourself. Resolve that you’re not going to repeat that mistake. Spread a lot of goodwill to others. Remind yourself that the reason we observe the precepts, the reason we practice generosity, is because we don’t want to harm anybody, and we’re happy to be helpful in the areas where we can. And the more you tear yourself down with remorse, the less strength you’ll have to be helpful and to be careful and to be harmless. So having a quick recovery time is very important. It’s an important skill in the practice. I think I’ve told you the story about my mother meeting my father. My father was friends with her younger brother in college. He happened to be in the area one time, the heir of their house. And so he was invited to dinner. And as he was sitting at the table, he knocked over his glass of elk. It was going to fall to the floor, and he was able to catch it before it hit the floor. And as my mother told me, that’s what attracted her to him. He was that quick to catch his mistakes. It’s sort of strange to think that I owe my existence to my father’s quick reflexes. But there you are. And the advantage we have as human beings is that we’re not made out of glass. If the glass had hit the floor, it would have broken. We sometimes hit the floor, but we don’t have to break. Just bounce back. Because there’s work to be done, and you don’t want to waste time. So look at the voices that are really, really hard to hear. And remind yourself that not every harsh voice in the mind is a voice of Dhamma. It’s all too easy for the harsh voices to take on that role, to make them sound like they’re Dhamma voices. Sometimes there’s simply something in the mind that wants to be harsh with itself, or is used to being harsh with itself. And once you learn the Dhamma, that becomes one more disguise or one more role that they take on. You can think about ways in which couples get together. Back in the old days, they would use Freudian analysis to destroy their relationships. Now there are cases where they can use the Dhamma. We could be a little bit more mindful here, couldn’t we? That comment right there can kill any relationship. Why? Because of the tone of voice and the intention. So look at your intentions. Remind yourself you’re here to put an end to suffering. And learn to recognize the voices in your mind, which ones are useful and which ones are baggage. Or burdens from the past. The ways you used to scold yourself, the ways you used to come down hard on yourself in order to make yourself behave. Sometimes it’s picked up from your parents. Sometimes it’s picked up from who knows where. But not every scolding voice is a Dhamma voice. One of the things I noticed about the talks given by the Ajahns is even some who are going to be quite harsh with their students, like Ajahn Mahaprabhu, were also very encouraging. And Ajahn Mun, who was reputed to be really stern, was also very encouraging. Because the big thing that can knock you down in the path is if you get discouraged, if you convince yourself that you’re not capable of doing it, that you don’t have it in you. That right there kills everything. That’s the most effective way of stopping the path that there is. Because, after all, the path is something you do. And if you don’t feel you can do it, you just give up. That’s it. So learn to train the voices inside. Learn to recognize the voices inside, which ones you should listen to, which ones you shouldn’t. And try to keep a positive attitude. You think you’re talking about the Buddha. For six years he kept finding dead ends, almost killing himself in the process. A lot of people would have given up. I’ve seen a number of people who think they’ve gained stream entry and then, after they realize they haven’t, say, “Well, then this must be impossible. I can’t do this.” And they go. This is where that quality that Ajahn Lee talks about, truthfulness, comes in. You’ve really got to stick with things, and part of that means that you’ve got to have a positive attitude toward sticking toward things and a positive attitude about yourself. You have to be confident that you can do this. So when you look at your life, you’ve got to meditate and it doesn’t look very good. Just tell yourself, “Well, there’s room for improvement.” And remind yourself you’re much better off than people who aren’t even trying to meditate. At the very least, you’re developing the perfection of persistence. Of course, what does persistence require? It’s a matter of generating desire. You want to do this, and you have to have that sense of the Self that’s competent to do this. Think about the people Ajahn Mun was teaching. This is back in the days when everybody in Thailand looked down on the Northeast. They were the bottom of the totem pole in Thai society. You’d hear all of his students were from the Northeast. So you have to encourage them. You’ve got what it takes to practice. You’ve got a human body. You’ve got a mind that’s relatively sane, sane enough to practice. You can do this. So he took people who were peasant sons and they became the teachers of the country. Some of them became teachers of the king. They developed that kind of confidence. And one of the things about confidence is that it breeds on confidence. You’re confident you can do something. It opens up the way so you can do it. Then when you find that you can do it, that gives you more confidence. Whether it’s going to take a long time or a short time, don’t make that an obstacle. As John Lee says, “Some plants grow like bananas.” The banana tree is a very fast-growing tree, but it doesn’t last very long. The trees that take a long time to grow are the ones that have a lot of branches that are going to produce a lot of fruit and they’re going to last for a long time. Those take time. So comfort yourself with the fact that you’re a hardwood and not a banana tree that has no core at all. So even though your progress is slow, it’s going to be solid. And that’s how you keep yourself on the path.

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