In Memoriam Roger Fox

July 24, 2019

Today we’ve received some bad news. Roger Fox, a longtime member of our community, passed away. So tonight we’re going to dedicate the merit of the meditation to him. Roger was a very generous person. He lived at the monastery for a while. He was a good all-around handyman. He fixed up a lot of the problems with the buildings. But his real joy was in cooking. Here at the monastery, when he would take the monks on camping trips, after he moved away and sent up the hermitage in Washington state, and invited the monks and the laypeople up to meditate, you never had to be afraid that you wouldn’t eat enough. In fact, he’d go on a camping trip, he’d come back, and he weighed more than he did when he started out. He took a real joy in providing an ample meal for everybody, and a very delicious one. But he was helpful in many ways. One of the qualities of his generosity was that it was consistent. A while back I was reading a book on positive psychology, and the psychologist was saying something really strange, which was that if you want to be appreciated, don’t be consistent in the way you help other people. If you’re consistent, they take you for granted. So the recommendation was to be spotty and irregular in your help to other people, which is horrible. Help is help, and it’s especially appreciated when it’s consistent. Because, after all, we have to eat consistently. We want our shelter to be consistent. We want all the good things in life to be consistent. And so if we want the results to be consistent, our actions have to be consistent as well. This is a principle that applies to generosity, applies to virtue, and applies to meditation. When the Buddha formulated the precepts, for example, they were meant to be held at all times. Someone once asked him, “Is the killing of anyone anything that the Buddha would ever recommend?” And he said, “Well, I can recommend the killing of only one thing, and that’s anger.” In other words, the principle is there. The Buddha said, “If you are consistent in holding to the principles, not killing, not stealing, not having illicit sex, not lying, not taking intoxicants, the consistency of your virtue is what gives protection to all beings.” You can’t protect them from other people’s harmful actions sometimes, but you make sure that nothing harmful comes from you. And you give universal safety that way. And because the safety is universal, you get a share of that as well. The same with meditation. If you want to get the results out of the meditation, you have to be consistent. You can’t just let your mind wander around and then kind of follow it wandering around. You’ve got to give it one thing to stay with, one thing you can stay comfortably with, and be consistent in sticking there. The other mind will fight. Remember, you’ve got a whole passel of people in here. Sometimes you use the image of the committee, but the idea of a committee sometimes is too orderly. There’s a rough-and-tumble in there. Lots of different voices, lots of different opinions. And you have to hold on to one, the one that wants to find an end to suffering. What that means right now is the one that wants to learn how to get the mind under control. And the control has to be wise. It can’t be control-freak control. It has to be the control where you understand how to get the mind to be willing and happy to stay here. So we think thoughts of good will remind ourselves that the practice we’re doing here is something that doesn’t harm anybody. And it gives us an opportunity to understand our own minds. We go through life using our minds to think about things outside. It’s like a tool that we’ve used. We haven’t really taken good care of it. We don’t really understand it. And because we don’t understand it, when something goes wrong, we’re at a loss. And because we haven’t taken care of it, something is sure to go wrong. So at the very least, when you get here to meditate and you notice all these other voices in the mind, don’t get upset. That’s a normal part of the territory. Remind yourself you’re here to learn, to see how the mind functions, because it’s been creating suffering all along, sometimes mixed with pleasures. If life were totally suffering, we wouldn’t be able to survive. But so often our actions lead to suffering, even though we want all of our actions to lead to happiness and well-being. So what is it? Why is it? What’s going on here? It’s like a police investigation. You have to accept the fact that you’re going to be seeing a lot of misbehavior, because you want to understand where it’s coming from. Who’s the gang leader? So you have to watch the misbehavior of the gang members. But you don’t give in. You don’t become a member of the gang. And you strengthen the good people inside by giving them encouragement. This is what’s called the strength of conviction. This is a quality Raja had a lot. He was really convinced in the virtue of generosity. He gave of his material wealth, but he also gave of his time, gave of his energy. He was convinced that this was going to be good. It would lead to happiness, now and in the future. That kind of conviction is a strength. Because if you don’t believe in your actions, what do you have left? Apathy. Defeatism. Both of which are forms of weakness. So you strengthen the mind with the conviction that the Buddha knew what he was talking about, and that all beings can, through their own actions, find their happiness. And so whatever is required to get your actions to be skillful is energy and time well spent. In the building, that is persistence. You just stick with it. You stay with the breath. If you slip off, you just come right back. If you slip off again, you come back again. Let there be an insistent quality to your determination that you really do want to understand this. You really do want to understand this issue of how to get the mind to be with the breath. And then use your mindfulness. You’ve remembered all the techniques you’ve learned in the past about how to make the breath comfortable, how to use that sense of awareness. of comfort to spread through the body, to create a really good place to be here. This use of your memory is something that’s often overlooked when people talk about mindfulness. They think that mindfulness is simply just being with the present moment. The Buddha never defined it that way, never used the term that way. For him, it was always an issue of the memory. And here, it’s the act of memory applied to what you’re doing. You’ve remembered what’s worked in the past, what hasn’t worked in the past. And if what used to work in the past is not working now, that’s when you bring in your discernment. You’re trying to figure out what’s going wrong. But the discernment here is not simply knowledge of what you’ve read in the books. It’s the kind of active discernment that looks at a problem, takes it apart, and then tries to come up with a solution. That’s included in the activity of mindfulness under the factor that’s called ardency. You really want to do this well. John Lee, when he explained mindfulness, said that it’s in ardency that the discernment arises. In other words, you realize that these teachings are not just to listen to or to read. They’re to apply for the sake of changing your mind. When you finally figure out how to get the mind and the breath together, that’s when you get the strength of concentration. The mind really does settle down with a sense of well-being, a sense of belonging. Then you learn to appreciate that. There may be a part of the mind that says, “Where’s the thinking? Where’s the planning? Where’s the entertainment? Where’s the intelligence?” The intelligence is in recognizing that a still mind is very valuable. It’s one of the ways in which we take care of the mind, give it a place to rest. Then we develop the discernment that allows us to see when it’s necessary to think and when it’s not necessary to think. When it’s not necessary, you go back to the concentration. You want to make this your default mode so that the mind doesn’t have to be using its thinking powers. It can rest. In the forest tradition, it’s like having a knife. If you just use the knife to cut, cut, cut, cut, cut through things, after a while it gets dull. It starts requiring a lot more energy on your part to make the knife go through. When it finally reaches a point where it doesn’t go through anymore, it’s just way too dull. But if you stop the cutting for a while and let the knife rest, sharpen it, then the next thing that comes up you have to cut. Well, it’s there, and it’s just one little chop and you’re through. This is what discernment does. It helps us see how to take care of the mind and how to understand what’s going on in the mind. When the mind gets really still, you can begin to see how a thought forms and how you begin to identify with the thought and where the suffering comes in in the process. Thinking is not necessarily suffering, but creating an identity around it that makes things into suffering. And you want to be able to see the difference. What are the stages by which this goes through? Because once you understand the stages, then you can change things. You can think but without having to suffer. You can rest but without having to suffer. And we do it by strengthening in these ways. And the strength, of course, comes from what? It comes from the consistency by which we practice. Because remember that the principle of action, that actions have results based on your intentions, that operates 24/7. So you’ve got to be heedful. And bliss, heedfulness, is one of the qualities that underlies all these strengths. And one of the things that heedfulness teaches you is that you’ve got to be consistent. You can’t decide, “Well, I’ll do a little bit of good today and then balance it out with things that are not so good.” You keep this principle of consistency, and the practice builds momentum. So as we think about Raja tonight, it’s good to think about the good qualities that he embodied. Because those are the things that he has with him now. And then we reflect back on ourselves. Death is something that waits for all of us. And what are we going to have as death approaches? We’re going to have the qualities that we’ve developed in the mind. So here’s your opportunity to develop some good ones. And once you’ve found something that’s good, then try to be consistent with it. If you’re true to it, it’ll be true to you. If you’re loyal to it, it’ll be true to you. If you’re not loyal to it, it’ll be loyal to you.

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