Learn from the Ants

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You can take a lesson from the ants, their nests around an area where it’s getting hot and dry. And if you told them, well, simply accept the fact that things change. Sometimes they get hot, sometimes they get cold, sometimes they get dry, sometimes wet. They wouldn’t listen to you. They’d want to find a place right now that’s cool and wet. So they came up, got into the orchids. And it’s the nature of any mind that when you find yourself in a bad situation, you look for something better. And the Buddha never said that’s bad. Think of him himself. He was in a palace. He saw that the pleasures of the palace, even though they were nice, were not going to last. So he didn’t just accept the fact that, oh yes, things are inconstant. He put up with them. He looked for something better. And his whole quest was premised on the idea there must be something that doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t die. There must be a happiness that doesn’t change. So even when he was studying with the teachers who taught very high levels of concentration, the state of nothingness, the dimension of neither perception and non-perception, he saw that they had developed conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment. They devoted good qualities of the mind to this. But they rested content with something that wasn’t ultimate. So he wasn’t satisfied. So he looked further. He tried austerities, maybe by getting the mind totally free from the dampness of sensuality as he saw it. He would set it on fire, just like you take wood out of a wet place, let it dry, and then you can use it to make fire. Well that didn’t work either. As he said, he could have died if he continued on that path. So he kept looking, looking, looking. And his characterization of it was the noble search. And he didn’t criticize other people for searching. Once he had found the goal, he encouraged them to search for it too. He compared it to a person looking for hardwood. He looks and finds bark, he finds leaves and twigs. And if he satisfies himself with the bark and the leaves and the twigs, the Buddha would criticize him. He’d say, “There’s something better. Look for it.” I was listening the other day to a Dhamma talk where someone was saying that the expression of stream-enterer, the expression of the Dhamma-I, is that whatever arises passes away. And the end of suffering comes when you just accept that. Look for the fact that whatever you love and hold on to is going to leave you someday. Accept that and then when it leaves you, you’re okay. That’s accepting suffering and claiming it to be the end of suffering. Again, that wouldn’t have satisfied the Buddha. And don’t let it satisfy you. There is something better. There is something higher. There is a deathless element. What the Buddha calls the deathless state, the deathless dimension. And it can be attained through the practice. This is why he said the two secrets for his awakening were, on the one hand, not resting content with skillful qualities, and two, strong determination, strong effort. Determination doesn’t always mean sitting long hours and sitting through pain, but it does mean putting an effort into understanding your mind and seeing where you’re causing suffering. And it’s going to be a battle because you’re going to have to fight against old tendencies. This is why when the Buddha describes the path and describes people following the path, the similes he uses often deal with martial imagery, an elephant going into battle, a soldier hearing the approach of an army and growing faint, or not growing faint, the soldier in hand-to-hand combat, either succumbing or not succumbing. But the idea is that you want to come out victorious. And even though there are some cases where the martial imagery carries all the way through in the Buddhist description of the practice, in a lot of cases, especially when you get to concentration and discernment, it switches over to craftspeople developing skill, a cook getting good at observing his boss, seeing what the boss likes, and then providing more of that. That’s the Buddhist image for your meditation as you try to figure out what’s a good topic for my meditation. Once I’ve settled on the breath, how do I make the breath interesting? How do I make it delicious? How do I keep it continually delicious? What variations do I have to make to keep it interesting? Or a marksman shooting arrows at a target. As the Buddha said, you want to be someone who can shoot accurately and shoot your arrows in quick succession and pierce great masses. Shooting in quick succession means seeing things in terms of the four Noble Truths, bringing very quick to see when something comes up in the mind. What is suffering? What is the craving? Which mental states are part of the path? Piercing great masses is piercing ignorance. So the work gets more subtle. But there’s still things you have to overcome, still battles you have to do. Even craftsmen have to overcome their laziness, their lack of being observant sometimes. That’s what this means right now. When the mind wanders off, you don’t just accept it. You don’t just follow it wherever it’s going to go. You bring it back. You bring it to the breath. You don’t strangle it when you bring it back, but you bring it back. And if it wanders off again, realize that you don’t have to bring it back so much. You have to just drop whatever it was that distracted it, and you’ll come back right back to the breath. Think through why you don’t want to follow that thought. Then you decide that it’s really not worth it. Then you come back. But the point is, you don’t just give in. And you just accept, well, this is the way my mind is tonight, so I’ll just sit with it the way it is. The whole point of the teaching is that you can change what you’re doing. If what you’re doing is not getting good results, then figure out something else you might try. And keep at it again and again and again. Like with the ants, we’ve thwarted their desire to create a nest with the orchids. But they’re not going to give up. They’re going to find some other place to make a nest. And you should have the same attitude towards your meditation. If you get thwarted in one way, well, just figure out something else. Because there is no problem in your mind that hasn’t been solved by somebody, someplace. You know, cultures change over time. And the way we frame a lot of issues in the mind will tend to change over time. Still, the basic problem is the same. Suffering is still clinging to the aggregates, and the aggregates are basically the same as they were, now that they were then. Form, feeling, perception, mental fabrications, consciousness. Once you read the definitions, you realize, okay, these are things you do, and doing them all the time. How the mind functions, how the mind works, that’s a constant. Works certain ways, it’s going to cause suffering. Works other ways, it’s going to lead to the end of suffering. That’s a constant. And the particular problems that you come up with have been dealt with by other people in the past. They figured out a way around it, so there must be a way around. You have to find it too. So learn from the ants, don’t give up easily. Once you realize that the desire for awakening is a healthy, skillful desire, then follow it as far as you can.

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