Go Out of Your Way

October 23, 2024

Training in the Dhamma is not just a matter of sitting with your eyes closed. You’re trying to develop all kinds of good qualities in the mind. They start from the outside and go in. One of Ajahn Fueng’s students told me one time that he had said to her that when I first came to show up on his doorstep, he had some misgivings about taking on a Westerner as a disciple. Westerners are known for their full-headedness, their insistence that things have to be done their way. What made him decide that he actually could teach me was the fact that I would voluntarily clean his spittoons. Nobody else was cleaning them, so I took them, cleaned them out. He thought, “OK, this is somebody you can teach.” Part of that was a willingness to help. Part of it was a volunteer attitude, that the good things need to be done. If you have to be told to do them, it’s a pretty sad case. This is one of the reasons why so much of the forest tradition training has to do with manners, cleanliness, orderliness, going out of your way to be helpful. You see a mess that somebody else has made, we don’t say, “Well, that’s their mess, let them clean it up.” It’s not good to have a mess in the monastery. So if you’re there, you have the time, you have the energy, clean it up. That can be your contribution. Because you may not be able to afford to build a whole new building for us, but keeping the building clean is like making sure that it stays new. That can be your contribution. And it’s one of the teachings in the commentaries that cleaning the monastery is rewarded by discernment. The tradition goes that Sariputta, the Buddha’s foremost disciple and discernment, was also very clean. And John Lee tells the story of putting on his robe, and at the same time he’s putting on his robe, he’s using his foot to brush away some leaves that are in the way. Now there’s always looking for an opportunity to go an extra mile, go out of his way to be helpful, to make a contribution to the group. That’s a good thing in the morning when you wake up. Part of it is, of course, that you spread thoughts of goodwill right away, and you make a determination that you’re going to practice all day, starting with the moment you wake up. But you can also stop and think, “What can I do to contribute to the group today?” Because you do want the group to be a group conducive to the practice. The Buddha talks about how it’s important to have a sense of well-being, a sense of joy, for the mind to settle down in concentration. And one of the sources of joy is that you’re in a community where everybody has the same virtues, everybody has the same virtue on the level of the noble ones. And we’re generous with one another. We treat one another with thoughts of goodwill, words of goodwill, actions of goodwill. That shows itself in little ways. If you can be clean outside, it’s a lot easier to clean up your mind inside as well. You might say that cleanliness is next to mindfulness. And the volunteer spirit is important. And Chan Phuong would notice that we make the comment often that nobody hired us to be here. Nobody hired us to practice. We’re here of our own free will. So we’re here voluntarily. And whatever opportunities there are to do good, see them as an opening. Chan Phuong’s students were going to go up to the jetty to meditate. They got up there and discovered somebody had left a huge mess. So instead of meditating, they cleaned up the mess. And one of the women was complaining, “How can anybody leave a mess like this in a place like this?” And Chan Phuong said, “Don’t complain. They gave us the opportunity to do some good up here.” So look at it that way. There are always opportunities for cleaning things up. Getting rid of weeds. Straightening things out. And this is all an important part of the practice. Because you sit down to meditate, you’re voluntarily giving yourself over to the practice as well. So if you have that volunteer attitude, it helps overcome a lot of problems in the practice. Because you’re just thinking about what you’re going to get out of the practice, and it’s not coming. You get discouraged pretty easily. But if your attitude has been from the beginning, that you’re here to give. You’re here benefiting off of other people’s gifts already. And so you want to pass on the goodness. You want to give too. Then when there are problems in the meditation, the question can always be, “What am I not giving yet? What am I not giving up yet? What attitudes, what misunderstandings can I get rid of?” That would make my practice go better. And the principle applies in the monastery just as it applies when you go out into the wilderness. They always say, “When you go to a wilderness area, try to leave the place cleaner than it was when you got there.” I’ll try to make the monastery cleaner than it was when you arrived. That can be your gift. People have commented on how hard it is to find the donation box here at the monastery. And part of the reason, of course, is we don’t want to be in your face with the idea of making people feel they have to give, or that we’re pleading with them to give, or begging with them to give. It’s funny, they talk about bhikkhu, the word bhikkhu coming from request. But Ajahn Phuong again would also say, “We’re not here to be beggars.” But another reason for keeping it hidden is to get people to stop and think, “Well, if I can’t give a donation of money, what can I donate? I can give my energy, I can give my time, I can give them my gratitude.” When you have that attitude, then the meditation will go a lot better. I remember reading about a monk, saying when he first arrived at a meditation monastery in Thailand, he noticed that a lot of people were, as he said, “pottering around.” You know, we say “pottering around” in America. And all these people are wasting their time. He thought, “They’re not really serious about meditating.” But then his meditation got really, really dry. It was all about “me, me, me, me, me.” And he would potter around, too. His meditation went a lot better. Because that’s not just about you. It’s a contribution you’re making. So starting from the outside, look at what you can do to give. Go out of your way. Because after all, awakening is out of your way. It’s not natural that people put an end to suffering, that they will put an end to this process of wandering on. The natural thing is just to keep wandering and wandering around. If you want to find awakening, if you want to find true happiness, you have to go out of your way. Otherwise, you get into a state of concentration, it’s very comfortable, and you just hang out there. And then it gets dry. But if you say, “Okay, I’ve got some good here. What further good can I do with it?” That’s when the meditation grows. Otherwise, living in a community becomes a burden. We’re getting in each other’s way. And all I can think about is how we want to go off and just be alone. And get away from everything. Of course, when you go alone, get away from everything, you’re not getting away from everything. You’re sitting there with your defilements. And sitting there, usually with a negative attitude. But when you can be generous with your time, generous with your energy, looking for opportunities to make the place clean, make the place orderly, then you’re coming to the meditation. When you do get off to be by yourself, you’re coming with a much more positive attitude, a much brighter mind. So it goes back to that old principle. The Buddha would start his teachings with generosity. Of course, it wouldn’t be just being generous with things. It also includes being generous with your time, your energy, your knowledge, your forgiveness. And having that attitude of “What can I give?” or “What can I give up?” will give you the energy to go far.

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