Accentuate the Positive

January 31, 2019

There’s a story they tell in Thailand about two friends who die. One of them gets reborn as a deva, and he wonders what happened to the other friend. So he goes looking for him and finds that he’s been reborn as a fly in a pit toilet. So he goes down to talk to him. He says, “What did you do to be born in this horrible place?” And the fly says, “What do you mean, this horrible place? I’m Indra. My head is green.” There’s a belief in Thailand that Indra has a green head. “I can fly around, and heavenly food comes pouring down all the time, more than I can eat.” There’s no laughter. It just goes to show how the mind can turn something really bad into something really good. Focus on the good points. I think of this often when I meet strangers sometimes who, seeing that I’m a Buddhist monk, have probably heard that the Buddha said that life is suffering, will insist to me that their life is not suffering. And then they go on to detail all the losses and horrible things that have happened in their lives, and they say, “But it doesn’t matter. It’s still worth it.” So the mind does have this ability to focus on what’s positive in the midst of a lot of negative things. So when you’re practicing, why can’t you focus the same ability on the practice? After all, there’s a huge difference. Most people’s lives don’t really go anywhere. The practice leads to the end of suffering, and it will involve some pain. But there’s a lot of pleasure involved in the practice as well. And, of course, it promises an overwhelming happiness, totally harmless, totally reliable, at the end. So always keep that in mind and then use that. That, plus the pleasures of the practice, to help you overcome any pains and disappointments and frustrations you may find as you engage in the practice. The Thai jhans often make the same point. They say you’re sitting here meditating, complaining about the pains in your legs, whereas you’re going to sit and watch a movie and sit still for hours and not complain about the pains in your legs. It’s because you’ve learned how to compartmentalize things and focus on them. Focus on the pleasure and put the pain off in an area where it doesn’t matter. So learn how to have that same attitude while you’re sitting here meditating. The pains in the legs are actually quite small. There are a lot of mental problems that we encounter as we practice because, after all, we are giving up lots of things. As the Buddha outlines the path, once you’ve heard the Four Noble Truths, the next step is resolve and renunciation. You’re going to give up sensuality. You’re going to see that it’s a bad thing. After all, the Buddha himself said he got on the path when he realized that his thoughts of sensuality are thoughts that deal with how much you would like a particular sensual pleasure, and dressing it up in your mind and then redressing it in your mind and then redressing it and adjusting it here and adjusting it there. This fascination we have with making sensual plans. These thoughts, he realized, were unskillful. They would bend the mind in a bad direction. So he resolved to try to give them up. Now, as he said, his mind did not leap at the idea of renunciation. But then he considered where sensuality goes and where the path goes. He realized renunciation goes to a much better place. So he was able to talk himself into putting the effort in that was going to be required. But renunciation doesn’t mean you’re simply left with nothing, whereas you had something before. You’re making a trade. And the trade here is for the pleasure of breath, the pleasure of form. That was the next step when the Buddha realized that even thoughts devoid of sensuality, if you thought them all day long, would get tiring. So the mind needs to rest. You bring it into the pleasure of concentration. As you sit here with the breath, you may find there are spots in the body that are not pleasant. But remember that old talent you had to focus on the pleasure and to ignore the pain? Well, apply that here. There have to be some parts of the body that can be made pleasant. As the John Lee points out, if the body were nothing but pain, you’d be dying. But here you’re not dying. So there must be some place in the body where you can focus that there’s a sense of well-being. Learn how to carve that out as the area where you’re going to focus. And learn how to talk to yourself in a way that’s encouraging. Most of the people I’ve seen whose practice has hit a dead end are the ones who are constantly talking to themselves in negative terms. Something goes really well in the meditation and they tell themselves it doesn’t matter. Something goes bad and it’s a sign that you’re never going to be able to meditate. Well, it’s not so much the good or the bad that’s happening, it’s the way the mind talks to itself. This is where those two factors of jhana come in, vittaka and vichara. As I said this morning, it’s not that you suddenly start doing them when you’re doing jhana. You’re talking to yourself all the time. You’re directing your thoughts to certain things and you’re commenting on them, which is what vittaka and vichara are, or directed thought and evaluation. It’s simply training yourself to focus these activities on some place where it’s going to be useful. Focusing on how to get the mind to fit together with the breath, how to get the breath to fit together with the mind. And John Lee had a really important insight, which was that vichara, the evaluation, is the element of discernment or wisdom in your practice. This is how discernment begins, learning how to talk to yourself in a useful way. So you talk to yourself about how the breath is going, where it is comfortable, where it’s not comfortable, what you can do to make it more comfortable, where it is comfortable, how you can maintain that. And once it’s maintained, then how you can spread it around to get full benefits out of it. Because we’re trying to create a state of mind here that’s more expansive. The positive fills the body. If you find there are parts of the body that you cannot make comfortable, just work around them. Remember that ability to focus on the positive and put the negative off to the side, or bring that to bear here. In other words, you have to be selective. Where you focus, what you talk to yourself about, what you tell yourself is not worth talking about. It’s not the case that you don’t know that there’s pain, and that you don’t know there are things that you’re giving up. But why focus on them? It’s the same with the areas in the mind that are not strong yet. If you want to know yourself, it means both knowing where your strengths are and where your weaknesses are. And then learning how to use your strengths in order to overcome those weaknesses. We don’t deny the weakness, but we keep looking for the strengths. So emphasize the positive. Or accentuate the positive, as that old song used to say. This is the point that the Daya Chands make again and again. It’s learning how to have a positive attitude towards things when they get pretty bad. Look for something that’s good in there. Take that old talent that we used to have when we were ignoring the drawbacks of our ordinary lives and focus on the parts that we liked. We’ll take that talent and put it to good use. Focus on something positive that really will lead in the right direction. Because this was the problem before, that you were seeing something positive in a course of action that really was going to take you, not necessarily to a pit toilet, but someplace pretty bad. You’re taking this ability to talk to yourself and you’re turning it into a discernment. You’re focusing on the positive of something that will take you in a good direction and doesn’t save all of its goodness for the goal. There are potentials for pleasure all throughout the body. There’s a potential for stillness in the mind. So look for them. Emphasize them. Accentuate them. Make that the topic of your internal conversation. A couple years back someone asked me about my years in Thailand and said, “What was the most difficult thing about being there?” And I thought and I thought and I thought, and I realized the fact that I couldn’t think about the most difficult part was probably why I was able to deal with the difficulties. There were plenty of negative things. Negative in the sense that I found them difficult to deal with, but I was looking at the positive side. Here was my opportunity to learn a new skill, to do something with my life that was more than just, as in the Buddhist old description of life, pleasure, pain, eating, dying. I had an opportunity to sit and practice. And in spite of whatever bad karma we may have in the past, the fact that we’re able to do this now means that we have plenty of good karma. So focus on that. In a John Lee’s image, he says you focus on the positive potentials right now. You’re living with the results of your past good actions. You’re hanging out with them. You’re making them your friends. You’re making wise people your friends. When you’re focusing on the negative side of things—the difficulties, the disappointments, the frustration—you’re hanging around with your old bad karma. As he said in his words, you’re hanging around with fools. So which do you want to hang around with, wise people or fools? You have the choice. In the past you saw the fools as being your friends. You liked them. Here’s your chance to make friends with wise people. You can then develop into something even more.

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