The Right Attitude

February 11, 2020

A large part of the meditation lies in the attitude you bring to it. Ajahn Sawat would often recommend that we come to the meditation with an attitude of being inspired, confident that we’re doing something good, that we’re fortunate that we have this opportunity to sit here and learn how to train our minds. Developing this positive attitude helps get you through a lot of the difficulties in the meditation, and it applies to the practice as a whole. We know that the Buddha, in terms of generosity, would say that you give where you feel inspired. So you could have an attitude that giving was something good, that you’d like to do it. But then he would go on and say, “If you want to make giving a skill, you have to think about some other things, and one of them is the attitude you bring to it.” You give with a sense of respect, with a sense that something good is going to come out of this. You don’t just go through the motions. It’s that attitude that makes the giving meritorious. And that ability to talk to yourself, to see things in a positive light, will carry over in the meditation. It’s the same with the practice of the precepts. If you see them simply as confining rules, there’s not much merit in observing them. It’s better than not observing them. But the quality of merit is the sense of refreshment, satisfaction, a sense of gladness that you’re able to do something good. Here we are. We have this human birth. Human beings can do a lot more good and a lot more evil than other beings. And the fact that we’re taking advantage of this opportunity to do good, we should appreciate that. We should be glad we have the opportunity. We want to make the most of it. And then you bring that attitude into the meditation. Here’s another opportunity to follow the Buddhist teachings and to bring them inside. In all these cases, it’s an affair of learning how to talk to yourself. There are various kinds of fabrication—bodily, verbal, mental. Verbal is the one that really makes the difference between whether you’re going to suffer or not. It’s possible to sit here with the breath not being very comfortable. But if you talk to yourself in the right way, you don’t let it get you down. Weird perceptions can come up in the mind. And if you remind yourself you don’t have to go with them, they don’t pull you down. Direct yourself and decide, “This is worth focusing on. This is not worth focusing on. This is worth doing. This is not worth doing.” You can direct yourself in all kinds of directions, skillful and not. You can create all kinds of suffering. Or you can create a path to the end of suffering. You have that choice. And of course, what inspires how you talk to yourself is the attitude that you bring to it. This is why we have those chants at the beginning. Reflection on the requisites. Here we are using food, clothing, shelter, and medicine that we’ve gained from other people. We’re in debt. How do we pay it? By paying back the debt and by practicing. We also realize that no matter how lightly we try to tread on the earth, the simple fact that we’re alive as human beings means that we place a burden. And it would be good to get out of that burden. It’s good motivation to practice. So we have the chants in goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. We’re showing goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for others. And it’s good that we’re able to do this, to develop an attitude of goodwill that’s universal, by looking for happiness in a way that doesn’t cause anybody any harm. We’re really fortunate that we have this opportunity. So keep reminding yourself of that when you meditate every day, every day. The Tamsui seems to get old. It becomes one more chore to go through. That attitude makes the meditation seem old. Nothing new is going to come up if you have that attitude toward the meditation. You’re going to miss everything that’s actually happening. But if you see this as an opportunity to get to know your own mind, here it is, the big problem in life. We want happiness. We do everything for the sake of happiness, and yet we keep on creating suffering for ourselves. Why do we do that? Where do we go wrong? Where are you going to look to find it, the answer to this? Right here, in the way the mind talks to itself. What it tells itself is right. What it tells itself is true. What it tells itself is worth doing and not worth doing. You want to see it as it’s making its choices. Why does it make a particular choice? What are your intentions? How does an intention get formed to begin with? Here’s the power that shapes our lives. And again, it’s hidden in shadows. It’s down in the basement. How are you going to bring it up into the light? By sitting here and watching the mind in the present moment. How do you stay anchored in the present moment? You watch the breath. So we focus on the breath, play with the breath, partly for entertainment, but primarily so that we can have a good vantage point for watching the mind in the present moment, and not get swept off by thoughts that would point to the past or point to the future. There’s that old koan about the finger pointing to the moon. “Don’t look at the finger, look at the moon.” You can turn it around. When your thoughts are pointing to the moon, you want to ask, “What do they want me to look at the moon for?” What are they trying to hide? “Go back and look at that finger that’s pointing to the moon.” There’s a lot to explore here. You can learn to understand your own mind, bring it under your control. And the opportunity to do this is really precious. So when you’ve picked up that attitude of seeing generosity as an opportunity, seeing your ability to hold to the precepts as an opportunity, have some enthusiasm for it, then you can bring that attitude and apply it to the meditation. Because this is something that’s worth even more enthusiasm than that. If your attitude toward generosity is kind of throwaway, then you’re not going to get anywhere. When you think of the benefits that come from observing the precepts and you throw them away, you’re going to throw your meditation away. You’ll develop a throwaway mind. You have nothing good left. But if you learn appreciation for opportunities to do good, to find happiness in a way that doesn’t harm anybody, to find happiness in a way that leads to long-term well-being, then you’re on the right track. The attitude you bring makes all the difference. So if there’s something lacking in your attitude, spend some time. Put yourself in the right frame of mind, because it’s the frame of mind that determines how much happiness you’re going to get out of this, how much energy you’re going to put into it, and how much goodness you’ll be able to create.

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