In the Mood

April 7, 2021

Jon Sowell would often say, “Start the meditation from getting the mind in a good mood.” Sometimes you might think you’re meditating for the sake of getting into a good mood. But here you’ve got to start with a good mood first. So if the mind is not in a good mood, start thinking in ways that improve your mood. You can think about all the good you’ve been doing. We live here at the monastery and we have the opportunity to be generous. Sometimes it’s day in, day out, and it gets tedious. It gives you some indication about the mind. You give it something good to do and even then it’s not satisfied. But there are times when it requires heavy work. It gets tiring. That’s when you have to learn how to talk to yourself, to remind yourself how fortunate it is that you have the opportunity to practice the Dhamma. This is true wherever you may be. It doesn’t come to everybody. And even for those people who do have the opportunity, it’s not that it’s going to last forever. So, think in whatever ways to get the mind in a good mood. The Buddha himself would talk about this. He’d say, “Act in ways that give rise to joy.” You can be generous, virtuous, and then reflect on your generosity, reflect on your virtue. It’s the reflection that amplifies the happiness. This is the way it is with happiness of all kinds. You think about sensual pleasures and how much of the pleasure is actually in that little bit of pleasurable feeling that you may get, and how much of it is in the way you dress it up. And you could probably say a good 95 percent is in the dressing up. You’re anticipating how good it’s going to be, and then your comments on how good it was after it’s gone. That’s how you amplify the pleasure. We could learn how to do the same thing with the pleasure of generosity and the pleasure of virtue, the difference being that the conversation is a lot more edifying, a lot more noble. You can think of all the good you’re doing, the fact that you’re making sacrifices and helping other people, and the sacrifices are not harming you. It just takes energy. And there’ll come a time when you don’t have the energy, but now you have it. So make good use of it. And when you see that you are making good use of it, give yourself an encouraging conversation about the topic so that when the time comes to sit down and meditate, there you are. The mind is a lot easier to watch when it’s in a good mood. After all, what is discernment about? It’s seeing how stupid you’ve been about certain things. There are areas where you knew better, and yet you still went ahead and did things that were going to cause suffering. There are certain ways you have of talking to yourself that are basically foolish. And you can catch them. If you’re in a good mood, it’s a lot easier to see them, admit them to yourself, and be willing to do something about them. Because here again, the meditation can be difficult. You’re sitting here and your legs hurt, and the mind sometimes doesn’t want to seem to settle down. And you can engage in a conversation that’s not all that helpful. Well, the conversation is free. It doesn’t take more energy to speak to yourself in a skillful way. And it doesn’t take more energy to speak to yourself in an unskillful way. So I expend the energy in an unskillful chatter. Talk to yourself in a way that’s encouraging. And if there’s a voice in the mind that wants to shoot that down, why believe it? We’ve got the example of the Buddha. We’ve got the example of the Noble Ones. And it’s not the case that they didn’t have difficulties, and they didn’t. They didn’t have strange voices in their minds. After all, the Buddha had Mara talking in his mind. They learned how to recognize, “That’s Mara. I don’t want to go there. I’ve had enough.” And then you can think in encouraging ways about all the people who meditated and had problems, and that they were able to overcome those problems. You may be a little bit slower than they were, but still, it can be done. There’s no problem in the mind that cannot be overcome. That’s one of the messages of reading the Buddha’s life. So take that message to heart and make it part of your inner conversation. And if the mind is already in a good mood, notice how the breath feels when you’re in a good mood, and see if you can improve on it. And if you can’t, well, just maintain that sense of good mood breathing and let it do its work. It’s like a cream you put on a rash. You don’t put the cream on the rash, and then take it off. You put it on, and you let it stay there. Let it soak in. And that’s how it cures the rash. The same when we have this comfortable breathing, noticing thoughts of goodwill, and how good it is to be thinking thoughts of goodwill. Notice the way you breathe. Take that as a guide. This is what good breathing starts with. And if you want to try to make it more refined, fine. But at the very least, be able to maintain it. Because it makes it a lot easier, as I said, to look at the mind when the mind is in a good mood. When the breath is good, your mood is good. It’s easier to look at things and see them for what they are. So as you go through the day, look at the goodness you’re doing. And don’t be afraid to pat yourself on the back. It’s in this way that you amplify the goodness. So you have something to invest in. Because as you deal with the pain of the meditation—physical pain, sometimes the mental pain of the meditation—when things aren’t going the way you want them to, it’s good to have some good reserves to draw on. So look carefully at what you’re doing. Look at how you talk to yourself. These two factors of direct thought and evaluation are helpful for analyzing your conversation. Are you talking about things that are helpful? And what kind of comments are you making about those things? If the mind is in a bad mood, which do you have to change? And what examples do you know? Some of us have the problem that we grew up in families where the conversation was not all that edifying, not all that helpful, sometimes destructive. But listen around. There are good examples. Learn how to train the voices in the mind. After all, there it is, independent co-arising. Right next to ignorance is fabrication. And one of the fabrications is verbal fabrication. As the Buddha said, if you do these fabrications in ignorance, they’re going to lead to suffering. But you can do them with knowledge. When you do them with knowledge, you’re exercising your freedom of choice. You can change the way you talk to yourself. So take advantage of that freedom. Make it part of the path. Because after all, you’re talking to yourself already. You might as well learn how to do it well. Because you’ll be doing it not only as you build up to the concentration, but also as you get into deeper and deeper levels of concentration. One of the ways that you do get deeper is by noticing what’s going on and asking that question, “What in here is a disturbance that’s not necessary?” And when you can focus that inner conversation, it comes from your ability to do your other inner conversation as you go through the day. The same with the conversation around discernment. Where is the stress? That Strata Thon evaluation is just asking that question, “Where is the stress? What is it? What’s causing it? What can I do to attack the cause?” So realize that this ability to talk to ourselves is a valuable tool that can be the cause for a lot of suffering, but it can also be a good part of the path. So learn to use it well from your daily activities on into the mind. And see how much of a difference it makes when you’re doing it with knowledge and not with ignorance, when you know what you’re doing and why. It opens up a lot of possibilities in the mind. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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