Toxic Environments

October 12, 2023

I may have already told you in Jon Fung’s instructions for how to deal with an unfriendly spirit. If you feel the presence of a spirit, or you see a spirit in your meditation, and you’re not sure how much you can trust its intentions, you should fill your body with light, if you have a sense of light in your meditation, or fill it with breath. Think of it being a force field inside where you fully inhabit your body. You don’t leave any space for anything else to come in. And then you spread lots of goodwill. That, too, is a protection. And it’s a strength. The Buddha teaches us goodwill. It’s not simply being nice to other beings, or being tender, or being sweet, or letting them do what they want. The Buddha equates ill will with wrong view, which means that goodwill is a part of right view. And you remember that right view is one of your more valued possessions. And it is protective. There’s a passage in the Canon that says that if you have goodwill, you’re not going to be afraid of fire or weapons. In the stories about John Lee, he was in goodwill to protect himself from forest animals. There was a time he was meditating alone in a forest, and the people in the neighborhood came to tell him that there was an elephant in rut, running through the forest. He was in danger if he stayed where he was. He decided to stay, until one afternoon the elephant actually came to the clearing where he was meditating. One look at the elephant and he realized that the elephant was crazed. So his first thought was to climb a tree. But then as he climbed the tree, he started climbing. The first step, something said inside him, “If you’re afraid to die, you’re going to keep on dying.” So he sat back down and radiated as much goodwill as he could to the elephant. And the elephant stopped. It seemed taken aback, and then very calmly walked away. There was another time when John Lee was out on a trudong with lots of laypeople. They had camped by the side of the sea in a forest. As they were meditating, he saw that there was a huge cloud of mosquitoes coming in off the sea. He told everybody to put up their umbrella tents and he was going to fight off the mosquitoes. He said, “With no holds barred.” I’m sure he realized the humor of that. Goodwill with no holds barred. But the mosquitoes went away. So think of goodwill as being a strength. Because what does it mean? You wish that all beings will understand the causes of true happiness and be willing and able to act on them. Which means if there’s anything you can do to stop people from behaving in unskillful ways, that’s an expression of goodwill. So you’re not just going along with whatever they want. And if you actually have goodwill for them, realizing, “Okay, it’s for their own good to stop acting in unskillful ways,” they’re going to sense that as being very different from you coming at them with anger or fear. So you’re trying to make them feel good. You’re trying to develop goodwill as your protection. Because we live in toxic environments. In a world where people can advocate war and not feel ashamed, it’s a crazy world. It’s a toxic world. It’s toxic both in the views that people hold to and that they tend to radiate out at you, and in the way they radiate their energy. So you’ve got to radiate back. This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath so much in the body. We’re trying to develop a state of concentration that is strong, full body awareness, full body breathing, so that energetically nobody can invade your space. You see, some people are defining sleep as samadhi. The Pali term for concentration is calm. And calm is part of it. But calm is a separate factor for awakening from concentration. Calm in Pali is basati. Concentration is stronger. It’s more centered, more grounded. It has more power. That’s the quality you want to develop here, so that you fully inhabit your space here. You can’t be invaded. And then radiating goodwill, as I said, is connected with the right view. You don’t want to take in other people’s attitudes, other people’s values, if they’re opposed to the right view. And the best way to resist that is through extending goodwill and thinking of goodwill as being enormous. The Buddha says, “Visualize your goodwill as being as large as the earth.” A man can come along with a hoe and a shovel and a basket and dig here, dig there, spit here, spit there, urinate here, urinate there, saying, “Be without earth, be without earth.” But it’s not going to make the earth be without earth, because the earth is so much bigger. In the same way, you want your goodwill to be large. And think of other people’s efforts to wear down your goodwill as puny. If you’re working in a toxic workplace where the toxic people have more power than you, remember you’re bigger than the workplace. And if you feel like you’re alone, remind yourself that you have the Buddha and the Noble Ones on your side. Hold that perception in mind. A lot of the reason why we feel so influenced by toxic places is because we’re hoping to take in something from them. We’re hoping for approval, something to give us some emotional sustenance. So we hope to feed on them. Of course, when you open yourself up to feed on things, they can be toxic. You take them in, they can harm you. But if you’re not eating on any toxic things, if you’re not taking them in, they won’t be able to harm you. So have a strong sense that you are radiating goodness, you’re radiating strength. And use the breath, use your concentration, use the force of your right view and your goodwill to radiate out into the world. And that can keep a lot of those toxic influences at bay.

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