Charge Your Batteries

November 4, 2023

There’s going to be a lot of activity tomorrow, so charge your batteries tonight. One way to charge your batteries is to get the right attitude. You probably know that sutta where the Buddha says that when you help yourself, you’re helping others. It illustrates that with the principle of the acrobats. Each acrobat has to maintain his or her own balance, so as not to knock the other acrobat out of balance. But there’s another side to that sutta as well. The Buddha says that when you help others, you help yourself. If you do it right, you develop good qualities in the mind and in the heart. He lists four. There’s goodwill, there’s kindness, and kindness. The Pali term anukampa is also translated as sympathy. But kindness seems to be a better translation, as you think about what you can do to help the other person. Sometimes they’re not really suffering, but they just need some help. So you’re happy to provide it. And then you’re going to run into difficult situations where you’re going to need patience and endurance and equanimity. These are virtues that are not well regarded in the West, and we’re learning to regard them well. But still, we’re not really good at them. Equanimity doesn’t mean indifference. It means you realize that there are certain things that you can’t change, and so you don’t focus your attention there. You focus your attention on the things where you can make a difference. As for patience, you just don’t react when things are negative. The Pali term kanti can mean endurance as well, that you find resources of strength inside to help you put up with things that are negative. In other words, you find something positive in the situation. Someone once asked me what was the most difficult part of being in Thailand, and I couldn’t think of anything in particular. Then I realized that that was why I was able to stick it out, because there always seemed to be something positive I could focus on. The physical situation was difficult. We didn’t have all the food and all the evening allowables. We were lucky if we had cocoa once a week. Things were pretty basic, but I was learning something new. I was exploring. I focused on that, that I hadn’t come for the food and I hadn’t come for the comforts. I had come to learn about my own mind and learn about my own body from the inside, dealing with the breath. The fact that I was learning new things made it possible to stick it out and not really focus on the fact that I was sticking it out. There were times when it was difficult. There’d be rainstorms, and the road up the mountain where I stayed was not paved at the time. So I’d slog up in the evening and have about an inch or two of mud on my shoes that I’d have to scrape off. The place where I was staying was not totally closed in. It was a concrete building with some breezeblocks. So even when there was wind outside, there was no way we could shut it out. But then I had the whole night to meditate. That was what was positive about the situation. So the lesson there is that when things are negative, when you’re running up against difficult people, don’t focus on the difficulty. Focus on the things that are going well. Realize you’ve got an opportunity tomorrow to learn cooperation, learn harmony, dealing with all kinds of people, coming up with all kinds of ideas about how they want to make merit. It’s an ideal situation for learning how to deal with other people. Because in the world outside, where the non-monastic world is, when you’re dealing with a corporation, you can’t depend on the idea that everybody’s there with good motives. It makes it difficult. Sometimes you’re working on your perfections and you feel like people are taking advantage of them. Right here you’re working on your perfections. Nobody’s taking advantage of anyone else. We’re all here voluntarily. We’re all here to do good. It’s just that our ideas about good and our ability to do the good are not equal. John Lee’s image is of a human hand. He says, “Look at your fingers. They’re all different lengths.” If your fingers were all the same length, he said, you’d have the hands of a monster. So take this as an opportunity to work on your perfections and look at it that way. That’s bringing the right attitude to the event. Then the other way of charging your batteries, of course, is to work on your concentration. Find your breath in your body. Notice how it feels. And then notice how you can change how it feels by the way you perceive it. Think of it as diffusing throughout the body. Your awareness is diffuse throughout the body. Start to develop a perception of the breath. Where no one spot in the body is the center of the breath. Every cell is breathing in and breathing out. Think about having a diffuse light throughout the body and a type of focus that allows everything to function without interference from the pressure of your attention. There was a book that came out a couple years ago. It was a book of pictures of the highest peaks here in California. The photographer had an essay at the end. He was talking about how his teacher, his model of a photographer, liked to take very dramatic photos of sharp contrasts, intense colors. So initially that’s what he would take pictures of. He’d wait at dawn until the sun would come up and cast an orange light on the mountains. He’d take his pictures in the same evening, right before sunset, when everything was really orange. The shadows were very sharp. But waiting for the sunset and waiting for the sunrise, and then hanging around after the sunset, he took a few pictures of the mountains in the pre-dawn light. He discovered that he actually came to like those pictures more because all the details were there. Every detail allowed its place because the light was diffuse. So that was the principle he used for selecting which pictures he put in the book. Because when the light is diffuse like that, you see everything. When there’s sharp contrast, a lot of things are thrown into shadows. And you want an awareness that’s not throwing anything into shadows here in your mind right now. So try to think of your concentration as having a solid, large base. And everything in the body is equal. Just try to maintain that perception, maintain that feeling of the body. And you find that it’s nourishing. Everything gets its share of the breath. Tension is allowed to diffuse. And the mind can settle down naturally. I think of a time during my very earliest year with Ajahn Phuong. He would keep talking about “catching the breath.” The Thai word is “chab.” And so I’d try to tense up around the breath, to catch it. And that just made things worse. One day I was sitting on a bus in Bangkok, and I realized that if I just allowed the breath to go on its own and all I had to do was just keep track of it, everything flowed a lot more easily. The whole body seemed satisfied with the breath. So, being a typical Westerner, I went back and I complained. “Why do you say to catch the breath? You catch it and it makes it worse.” He laughed. He said, “That’s not what he meant.” Turns out the word “chab” can also mean just to hold on to something, stick with it. That’s what you do here. You can think of it as a snail sticking to the stem of a plant. It stays with it all the way up the stem. Same way, you stay with the breath all the way in, all the way out. Don’t put pressure on it, but be still with it and allow everything in the body to be nourished. That way you charge your batteries in terms of concentration. Of course, you don’t want to be concentrated like this only when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. You should have a sense of this foundation that you carry with you through the day. It’s not just one more ball that you have to juggle. It’s where you stand as you’re dealing with your other responsibilities. Make this your home base. Carry it through different situations and you’ll find that the mind feels a lot more solid, feels a lot more secure, which helps with its patience and equanimity and its willingness to be kind and have goodwill for others, because it’s coming from a position of strength and well-being. This is one of those cases where you help others and you help yourself. And the line between helping others and helping yourself dissolves away. It’s sometimes said that Theravada is selfish. We’re looking out only after our own individual good. But you’ll see tomorrow that the people who come, who hand out the food, who bring the offerings, they’re not following a selfish religion. Decades back, when Westerners went to study Buddhism in Thailand, they would read up on the texts and the texts sounded pretty dark. It was all about suffering, karma, heavy stuff. And they went and they found that the Thais were very joyful in their religion. And their first conclusion was that the Thais didn’t understand their religion. Of course, the problem was that the scholars didn’t understand. Because this is a religion where you’re happy and your happiness spreads around. If your happiness is based on wealth, gaining status, gaining praise, gaining sensual pleasures, then it’s going to create divisions. But if your happiness is based on generosity, virtue, goodwill, then there’s no clear line between your happiness and the happiness of others. The two go together. They strengthen each other. And that’s how they grow.

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