

The Duty to Be Positive

December 25, 2014

I think I've told you the story of Chao Khun Nor. He was a meditation monk who spent most of his life as a monk, in fact all of his life after his first five years as a monk, in a monastery in Bangkok.

One night he was doing walking meditation outside of his hut. He had made sure that electricity hadn't been brought to that part of the monastery when he was staying there, so it was fairly dark. A young monk who had been there for about a year or so came running up to him and said "I've got this horrible thought in my head, and I can't get rid of it. It just keeps eating away at me." And Chao Khun Nor said, "Well, you're following the wrong duty." Then he went into his hut.

Fortunately, the young monk had been studying enough of the Dhamma to realize what Chao Khun Nor was saying: Each of the four noble truths has a duty, and thinking about thoughts that wear you down—about what's wrong with you, things you've done in the past that you feel ashamed of—is not one of your duties. Those sort of thoughts are not to be developed. What you should develop are factors of the path. And one of the factors that's important in this case is the motivation that forms a part of right effort. You need energy to follow all the other duties you've got to do, and if you waste your energy by pulling yourself down, you're neglecting your duties with the noble path.

That's why recollection of your generosity and recollection of your virtue are both really important parts of the path. They're not there to make you simply feel like you're good enough as you already are. They're there to give you the energy you need to pick up your duties and carry on. As the Buddha said, death can come at any time, and just the thought, "Here I've got a breath that I can breathe in and breathe out, so let me practice for the time I have to breathe that breath": If you think in that way, you're being heedful.

If you're sitting there thinking, "I just want to wallow in my misery for a while," that's heedlessness. Sometimes we think that it's being realistic, that we should really believe the voices in the mind that say, "I'm a really bad person, I'm a horrible person, and I'm never going to get anywhere with this

practice and I might as well give up.” Those are destructive voices and are not really helpful on the path at all. They’re obstacle that get in the way.

This is one type of thinking that the ajaans in Thailand are constantly hammering against: to sit there destroying yourself with your low self-esteem. You make yourself a burden to yourself and often make yourself a burden to others, but the most important thing is that you’re neglecting your duties and wasting your opportunities. You’ve got this opportunity to practice right now, you’ve got this breath, coming in right here, right now, and you don’t know how many more breaths you’re going to have. When death comes, it can come very swiftly, without any warning, and your last breath should be one of which you can say, “Well at least I practiced with that breath. I’m right here.”

When you’re thinking about your generosity and your virtue as an habitual practice, it’s going to be that much easier to remember those things when the moment of death really comes and you need something good to hold onto. If you’re constantly wallowing in thoughts of “things I’ve done in the past that were really embarrassing” or “things that I’ve done that were really horrible,” those thoughts are going to come back as an habitual groove in your mind as the body weakens, and especially when there’s the sudden surprise: “This is it. This is death.” The mind then starts grabbing at anything, and you don’t want to be habitually grabbing at thoughts that pull you down.

So think about the times you’ve been generous, like that question we had this afternoon, “What gift did you give that you most enjoyed giving?”

That’s something that we should actually think about. It might’ve been a material thing. It might’ve been a gift of your time, a gift of your energy, a gift of your knowledge, something you really enjoyed most giving. And here we’re talking about gifts that are not required like for Christmas or birthdays or whatever, but the more spontaneous gifts: the ones you gave simply because you wanted to.

Similarly with the precepts: Think about the times when you could have harmed somebody or could have harmed yourself, but you didn’t; you’re glad that you were able to make it past the temptation.

Those are thoughts you want to be able to access easily. Don’t be like the girl today who asked what gifts she most enjoyed giving and was caught up short. After all, today’s the day about getting, but the important thing is realizing that the giving is where the real joy lies.

The joy that comes from getting something doesn't last very long. You get things and they're interesting for a while and then you lose interest, and you look for the next thing and the next thing. But the joy that comes from having given something, that can last a whole lifetime. The joy that comes from realizing, "I could've done something really bad, and nobody would have known, but I didn't do it that one time at least": That's a joy with a lot of staying value. And it's there as part of your motivation in right effort. It's something to be developed. Again, this is not for the purpose of giving you the sense that "Hey I'm already a great person," but it's enough to give you the sense that "Okay, I've got some worth to me, and I can take that worth and I can take that energy that comes from reflecting in these ways and devote it to the practice. I can build on it."

This is an aspect of being heedful. You have to learn how to connect those two ideas in your mind. All too often our idea of being heedful is simply learning to be critical of ourselves: "Hey, I didn't do that well, this isn't good, that isn't good." We do have to recognize where we've made mistakes, but we also need to develop the confidence that we don't have to repeat them. There are things you have to let go of, and the letting go requires a certain amount of energy. We don't let go out of weakness. We let go out of strength, and the strength has to come from a sense of our own worth.

So learn how to cultivate that sense of your own worth. It's a duty, it's a friendly duty, even though this practice is not always an easy one. No one can ever promise that it's going to be easy. There are, as the Buddha said, some people for whom it's quick and pleasant, but those people have already gone. We're the ones remaining. It's going to be hard and it's going to take time. So you've got to learn how to strengthen yourself from within, and reflecting on your good actions is one of the important ways of doing it, one of the most healthy ways of doing it. If you look back and there are no gifts that you really are happy that you gave, well, start thinking of some gifts that you would be happy to give and go ahead and give them.

If you don't have the money, think about giving gifts of your time, gifts of your energy. We're here in the monastery. It's an economy of gifts. Everybody here is giving one thing or another. Nobody's getting paid. But you might want to think about extra special ways that you might want to give something, something you feel really satisfied with having given, because the effect of that act of giving ripples through.

When the Buddha started his gradual discourse, he always started with generosity to get people ready to see the four noble truths. He wanted them to reflect on the times that they had been generous, and then he went on to the precepts, virtue. He wanted them to reflect on the times they had been virtuous, and then think about the rewards of these activities that lead to rebirth in heaven.

Once he had strengthened you in that way, giving you a sense of your own well-being and personal worth, that's when he would point out the limitations of these activities. But the important point is that you look at the limitations after you've been strengthened, after you've got a sense of your own inner worth. After you've pondered the limitations, that's when you're ready for renunciation; and when you're ready for renunciation, that's when you're ready for the four noble truths.

So we're building up to our appreciation for the noble truths by getting the mind prepared through our generosity and our virtue.

This way, when we let go, we let go, in Ajaan Lee's words, as rich people. We don't let go like paupers. Paupers let go of things they don't even have because they can't gain them, and it doesn't really get them anywhere.

But when you've got this inner worth, then when you let it go, it doesn't go anywhere. It's still right there, simply that you're not latching on to it. As the Buddha said, when you start getting too obsessed with measuring yourself against other people, that's when your goodness becomes a burden. It actually becomes an obstacle on the path.

So learn how to reflect in a way that gives energy to your practice, that heightens your heedfulness. You need strength to face this difficult path, and part of the strength comes from remembering the good things you've done, taking joy in them. See this as a duty, a pleasant duty. Don't feel embarrassed about it. Some people feel embarrassed about extending goodwill to themselves or thinking about their past generosity because they feel it's self-indulgent or not real. It's real. We admit that there are things we've done in the past that are not so good, but for the sake of putting an end to suffering you don't want to dwell on them. Take energy from things that give you strength and then apply that strength wisely. That's what keeps you on the path.