Sober Up

January 17, 2023

Where I grew up, we had a lot of maple trees. In the fall, I always wondered, “Where did the red come from in the leaves?” It was years later that I found out that the red was already there all the time. It was covered up by the chlorophyll. In the fall, the chlorophyll left the leaves and there was the red that had been there all along. It’s the same with the body. When it’s young, you say, “Where can it possibly get old?” But the aging is already happening. It’s just that the body at that point is really good at repairing itself. So you hardly see the aging. But over time, that ability to repair itself begins to wear down. And the signs of aging that were already there begin to show. It’s good to think in this way. It overcomes what the Buddha calls our intoxication. He talks about when he was young. And he was intoxicated in three ways. It had nothing to do with alcohol or marijuana. It was intoxication with youth, intoxication with health, and intoxication with life. As a youth, he couldn’t see how he was going to get old. As a healthy person, he couldn’t see how he was going to get sick. Alive, he didn’t see how he was going to die. But then he reflected, “This is what happens to everybody else. Surely it was going to happen to him.” Keeping that reflection in mind, that’s how he overcame his intoxication. These are things we all know, but we act as if we don’t. We let ourselves forget. And when we forget like that, we can do all kinds of stupid things, let our minds run wild with all kinds of ideas, and tell ourselves, “Well, maybe someday I can get things together. But right now, there’s no hurry.” The Buddha is advising us, though, that we do have a sense of hurry. Not sloppy hurry, where you just rush through things. But have a sense that you don’t know how much time you’ve got. So you’ve really got to get your act together. One of the first steps is getting the mind to stay with one thing so you can learn how to rely on it so it can keep things in mind. When it jumps around from thought to thought, there’s a little bit of forgetting that goes in between each of the thoughts. And there’s a part of the mind that likes the forgetting, the irresponsible part of the mind, the part that doesn’t want to be held accountable. And it’s just going from thought to thought for the entertainment value. Here it is, the mind sabotaging its own true well-being for a little bit of pleasure in the present moment. It’s not all that satisfying, but it’s the part of the mind that really doesn’t want to do some serious work. Because when you think about aging, illness, and death, you’ve really got to get yourself ready. That’s going to involve looking at all the things that you’re attached to and realizing that a lot of them you’re going to have to let go. And it’s going to require work. Some of the causes of suffering, the Buddha says, go away when you simply look at them. But there are a lot that require work. You have to exert a fabrication, as the Buddha says. You have to look at the way you’re breathing, you have to look at the way you’re talking to yourself, you have to look at the perceptions you hold in mind and the feelings that you focus on, and see where they’ve been kidnapped by your defilements and where you’ve got to get them back. The way the mind talks to itself in particular is very important because it can really destroy any initiative you have, any confidence that you can actually do this path. You have to put a big question mark against those cynical voices. Because what are they? They’re the voices of laziness. And laziness never helped anybody. So make up your mind you’re going to stay with the breath. And then notice whatever comes in that’s going to pull you away. You have to say, “Notice.” In the course of the day, there may be other things you have to think about. But right now, as you meditate, this is the one thing you’ve got to do. Stay with the mind. Stay with the breath right here. And then as any thoughts come up that would pull you away from your awareness of the present moment and your awareness of the breath, you’ve got to be firm with them. You’ll say, “Well, you’re going to give up in a little while anyhow, so make it easy.” But no. Tell yourself, “I don’t know about a few minutes down the line, but I do know that right now I’m not going to give in.” Try to see through all their other tricks for pulling you out. Because they are the voices of intoxication. It’s interesting to notice that. That’s the way the precept against intoxicants is defined. Fermented and distilled liquors that cause heedlessness. That’s precisely what you’re trying to forget when you’re intoxicated—that you have to be heedful, that your actions have consequences. So you have to be really careful about what you choose to do. People don’t care about consequences. They want to forget about the past, forget about the future. And in their own way, they’re right here in the present moment. That’s a very irresponsible way of being in the present moment. The responsible way is to remember that what you’re experiencing right now is coming from past actions. You’ve got the good fortune to be here meditating, so don’t throw that away. You worked hard to have this opportunity. There are very few people in the world who have it. And what you choose to do right now will have an impact on you in the future. That’s what you want to remember—the lessons of heedfulness, the lessons of cause and effect, and particularly the causes that come out of the mind. They’re sitting right here. You might say you’re sitting on a powder keg. There’s a lot of power that can be used for the good. It can also be used for evil things. And it can also be just fritted away. But when you’ve worked hard to be a human being, worked hard to get to the point where you can meditate, you don’t want to throw that away. You don’t want to fritter it away. You want to do the best that you can, given the opportunity. And so if the cynical voices say, “Well, the best you can do is not very good,” tell them, “I don’t care. I’m going to do the best I can.” You may not measure up now, but by doing the best you can, you develop strengths in the mind. Then you can begin to show yourself that, yes, you can resist temptations and you strengthen the good qualities of the mind through exercise. They actually do become strong. It’s like exercising the body. You’re embarrassed to go down to the gym because everybody else is a lot more fit than you are. But that embarrassment is not going to help you get strong. And if they look down on you for being puny and weak, well, that’s their problem. You’re going to do what you can. So there may be belittling voices in the mind that say, “Well, what you can do is not all that much.” The fact that you’re putting in an effort means that there’s hope. As the Buddha says, when he sees a monk who’s meditating or really struggling with it, he sees hope there. The monk himself may be discouraged, but he’s struggling. The fact that he’s struggling means that there is a possibility of winning someday. If you don’t struggle, how can you even say that you lose? You have to put up a fight. And if you lose, well, at least you fought. Next time you come back and you fight some more. The tendency of the mind is to just wander around. That’s what samsara is all about. The word samsara means “wandering eye.” That’s what we’re going to keep on doing. And we’re going to be continually drunk, continually intoxicated with the wandering, until we decide we’ve had enough. And if you don’t think you’ve had enough, remind yourself of what the Buddha said. You see somebody who’s really poor, you’ve been there. You see somebody who’s really rich and powerful, you’ve been there too. And if you don’t do something about it, you’re going to go back to those places—continually intoxicated. So this is a sober path. Now, sober doesn’t mean it’s dull. Sober means that it’s mature. When you’re sober, you can actually work for your own true benefit. Take advantage of the fact that you’re here, breathing in, breathing out, and you can choose, of the various voices in the mind, which one you’re going to follow. You’re going to follow the one of the Dhamma, because it’s the voice that has your own true best interest in mind, that heart. So use these thoughts to change the conversation in the mind. Any ways of talking to yourself to keep you weak? Replace them. Any thoughts that are discouraged? Replace them. That’s when you’re sober. And that’s when you sober up.

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