

In the Mood to Meditate

November 23, 2014

Ajaan Suwat would often begin the meditation instructions by telling you to put yourself in a good mood. You're here doing something that's really noble: training your mind. You recognize that the suffering you cause yourself and others is something that you can learn how not to do. You're taking responsibility for it. And you're going to learn the skills that help you to stop doing the cause that gives rise to suffering, whatever that cause may be. This is a good thing. There are so many people out there in the world who are not doing this at all. You're sitting here and you're doing something responsible and totally harmless.

This fits under the theme of meditation called recollection of virtue. It's one of the recollections that's meant to put you in a good mood so that you can focus well on the breath.

Sometimes it's easy to settle down with the breath: Just sit down and tell yourself, "The body has total freedom to breathe in any way that's going to feel good," and it will respond. And the mind is willing to go along with it. There are other times, though, when it's not. Either there are some physical difficulties or some spots of tension or whole globs of tension in your body that you can't work through. You'll have to learn how to work around them, and that requires patience. This is why you have to give yourself some encouragement.

Or maybe there's something hanging on in your mind. Sometimes the two are related: the physical blockage and the mental blockage. So you can work at them from either angle. But it requires patience.

That's why it's important to put yourself in a good mood. When you're in a good mood, it's easy to stick with long-term projects.

I was talking today to someone whose computer crashed. It was a major crash, and it's been taking him a whole day to put things back together again. I would have thought that, being so busy with the computer, he wouldn't have time to talk to me. But he actually wanted to talk to me to get himself in a good mood so that he could continue with the work.

This principle applies in all kinds of areas. Work that's difficult is a lot easier when you're in the right mood.

So when you find that there's a difficult issue in your mind or a difficult issue in the body, stop to reflect: You've got some goodness to you. The Buddha recommends recollection of virtue and recollection of your generosity, both of which remind you that you've got some goodness to you.

Both of them remind you that you've got some inner wealth. It's when you're feeling poor inside or lacking inside: That's when it's difficult to find the energy to take on a difficult task. But the fact that you're able to be generous with your time, your energy, your material goods, your knowledge, or your forgiveness: That puts you in a position where you sense that you've got more than enough. You've got plenty to share.

You can remember the attitude you had when you gave something in a genuine act of generosity. Today we were talking about times when you gave when you weren't forced to, you didn't have to, but just out of the goodness of your heart. You saw that you had something and there was someone else who could use it, and you felt happy to give it to that other person. You were under no compulsion at all. Try to remember those times.

Sometimes you hear people saying, "That'll get you tied up in spiritual pride." But there's a certain kind of pride that's helpful. We're not here to compare ourselves much with other people. We're here just to think about the goodness we have and to use that thought as energy to create more goodness. Spiritual pride is bad when it starts cutting into your present goodness. In other words, you think of the good things you did in the past and decide that you're good enough and you're not going to have to do anything anymore. That's when the pride gets destructive.

And remember, as the Buddha said, a stingy person can't get into jhana and there's no way a stingy person can gain any of the noble attainments. So the generosity you've done is what opens the way in the practice.

Now, if you try to think back and can't think of any times when you were generous in that way, go out and do something that's generous. Think of something you have that someone else could use well. Or think of people you haven't forgiven yet, and you can sit right here and forgive them.

What does forgiveness mean in the Buddhist context? It means that you pose no danger to them, you're not going to try to get back at them, you're not going to carry around a grudge. It doesn't mean that you necessarily forget that they did something unskillful. Because there are people you've got to watch out for—in other words, the people you can forgive but you don't want to have much more to do with them anymore. But you can remind yourself, okay, even though they've done unskillful things to you and they've harmed you or harmed people you love, you're not going to pose any danger to them. You're going to leave it at that.

Now, the prospect of getting reconciled with that person may be impossible, but at the very least you can sit here and unilaterally forgive that person. There are times when you have to forgive yourself for certain things you did in the past. Be

generous with that, too.

Of all the various kinds of generosity, forgiveness is the one that requires the least energy, the least material wealth, and should be the least difficult, but often it's the hardest. But as you find it in yourself to forgive, that should give you energy. It places you a little bit above your old situation, your old position of feeling victimized or under the pressure of that person. You can rise up above.

Recollection of your virtue is a similar sort of thing. You think about times when you could've broken the precepts but you said No. Nobody else was watching, you could have done it, but No, it was point of honor.

That's a word we don't hear much nowadays—honor—but it's good to revive it, at least in your own life if you can, through the example of a person holding to a code of honor. In other words, you won't stoop to unskillful acts, you won't stoop to things that are beneath you, regardless of the fact that everybody else in the world may seem to be doing that. They may look down at you for having your code of honor, but you know that it's something of real value to yourself. That's another thing that can put you in a good mood, the proper mood to meditate: that you're an upright person.

There may have been times when you did break the precepts but you don't have to focus on those. Focus on the times when you maintained the precepts, even in spite of difficulties, even in spite of strong temptations. Part of the reason for this is to put you in the right mood and part of it is to remind you that you have the skills to say No to unskillful impulses. Because you're going to need those skills as you meditate.

You sit here with the breath and it's not all that long before another thought comes up and says, "How about thinking about this? Or how about going over there?" You remind yourself that you've learned how to say No in the past to things that were a lot more tempting. So bring out those skills.

Similarly with generosity: You realize that to be happy, you have to give. So if you're sitting here waiting, "When are the good results going to come? When am I going to get that rapture? When am I going to get that pleasure? When am I going to get these things I'm supposed to get before I go home?" the lesson of generosity is that you gain by giving.

Someone the other day complained about the story about the poor man who goes to hear the Buddha at night. He was so poor that he and his wife have only one upper cloak to wear, which meant that only one of them could leave the house at any one time, because you didn't go around in those days with your chest exposed, neither men nor women. So that meant she had to stay home that night. He went and listened to the Dhamma talk.

The Buddha was talking about the good results that come from generosity. The poor man was thinking about how poor he was and how it was probably because he'd never been generous. He asked himself, "What do I have to give? All I've got is this cloak. But if I give this cloak away, what am I going to do?" So he fought back and forth, well into the night.

The Buddha kept on giving his Dhamma talk. Finally, around midnight, the man made up his mind: He was going to give his cloak to the Buddha. So he stood up and shouted, "*Jayo!* Victory!" He went down and gave the cloak to the Buddha.

Word got to the king, who also happened to be in the audience, that this man was so poor that this was the only cloak that he and his wife had. So the king gave lots of things to the man. The man gave those to the Buddha. The king doubled his gift. The man gave those. It finally got to the point where he'd multiplied the gift by sixteen times. At that point, the man gave eight of them to the Buddha, whatever it was, and took the remaining eight home.

The person talking about this story found it distressing that the man got that reward afterwards. He didn't like the idea that giving is supposed to have a reward. You're supposed to give and be totally sacrificing.

That is part of the ideal attitude toward giving, but at the same time you have to realize that, given the principle of karma, when you give, there's going to be a reward. It may not be quite as fast as that man got his rewards, but it is an exchange. You give a material item not because you hope that person's going to give you something back. You give it because there's merit in giving. Still you can't help knowing that there will be a reward sometime, someplace down the line.

Now, your motivation may grow more and more refined as you get more experienced in giving. But you have to see it as a trade, just as renunciation is a trade. In fact, this is the lesson that gets carried over into the meditation: There are thoughts you could be thinking right now but you just give them up, even though they could be pleasant and you could sit here and fantasize for a whole hour. But you realize it's not worth it. It's much more rewarding just to drop those fantasies and get to work.

So recollection of the virtue you've practiced in the past and recollection of the generosity you've practiced in the past are not just to put you in a good mood. They're also to remind you: You've learned lessons from generosity, you've learned lessons from virtue that are going to be really useful as you sit here and meditate.

After you've thought about these themes for a while and you finally get to a point when you really do feel inclined to be with the breath and to stick with the breath regardless, then you can put those recollections aside and settle down here

with the breath with a sense of well-being.