Impossible Things

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There’s a character in Through the Looking Glass who says that he likes to think about two or three impossible things every morning before breakfast. It helps air out his mind. And it’s a good strategy for us as meditators. Think about a couple of impossible things that you’re going to master the concentration. You’re going to taste the deathless. Of course, these things, strictly speaking, are not impossible, but there seem to be a lot of voices in our mind that insist that they are. So it’s good to think of them every now and then, to remind yourself that your life isn’t already written in stone, that you’re not a slave to fate or just a little cog in the big machine of the world. You’re actually a shaper. You’re a mover and a doer. And you can shape your life in the direction you want it to go. The Buddha said that there are four types of action in the world. Things we like to do and give good results. Things we don’t like to do and give bad results. Things we like to do and give bad results. Things we don’t like to do but give good results. The first two are no-brainers. You do the things without even thinking that you like to do and give good results. There’s no conflict in the mind. The same holds true for things that are difficult to do and give bad results. You don’t want to do them. There’s no discussion. The committee is unanimous. The difficult actions are the ones that you like to do and give bad results, and the ones that you don’t like to do but give good results. The Buddha had an interesting comment on these latter two ones. He said that these are a measure of a person’s discernment, a measure of a person’s wisdom. He didn’t say that they’re a measure of your willpower. Basically, he said it takes discernment to do the things you don’t like to do but give good results, and it takes discernment not to do the things that you like to do but give bad results. And the discernment lies not only in seeing the connection between cause and effect in each case, but also in learning how to outmaneuver the committee members that just want to do what they like to do and want to avoid what they don’t like to do. And it’s learning how to understand your own mind, to see how you can maneuver these things, maneuver around the disruptive voices in your head, the kind of discernment that can see through the blockages the mind puts up for itself, the difficulties it creates for itself, how to see through them. One of the biggest difficulties that we create for ourselves is our self-image. We notice that it’s difficult to do things that are good for us, and it’s easy to do things that are hard for us, and we come to think that our nature is to be lazy. Or the lazy side of the mind is our true self, because the other side obviously takes effort. The easy side is the one that just sort of goes with the flow. That must be who we truly are. That kind of thinking is really self-destructive. We think of the times that we’ve done the right thing, that we’ve meditated, followed the precepts, lived in line with the Dharma. But all we can think about is how much effort it took. We say, “That must not truly be me. I must be somebody else. I must be the person who things are easy for. I must be lazy. I must have lots of very poor willpower.” That kind of attitude is a huge misunderstanding. The things that are difficult are hard for everybody. It’s just that some people are able to look at the issue in a different way. Instead of creating a self-image out of it, they just simply focus on, “How can I maneuver around this laziness? How can I move around this negative attitude?” They experiment and try different ways until they find what works. This is what we have to do in our meditation. We find ourselves up against that kind of obstacle. Learn how to take apart your self-image. Realize that your self-image is not a given. The image itself is not a given. It’s a pattern. It’s a habit, this kind of self-imaging that we have. If it gets in the way of what you really want, then no matter how much it screams to you that this is your true self, this is the way you really are, you have to question it. You have to take it apart. Don’t believe it. No matter how much the mind may say it doesn’t want to struggle, that’s just one part of the mind. There is another part that does want to do the struggle, does want to have the strength, does want to see things through. The other side has sabotaged that by saying, “Well, that’s not really me.” Well, who is this other side? Who is this saying, “the me”? Do you really want to identify with that? You have the choice. You try to find the holes in the argument. You learn how to take things apart. This is one thing that you have to learn how to deconstruct, the negative habits of the mind. The first thing is to question their truth, question their validity. After all, the Buddha said, “The mind can be trained, and happiness comes from the training.” If people couldn’t change, there’d be no point in teaching the Dharma. There’d be no point in trying to practice. We all have the possibility of changing. Each moment is a new moment, a moment where there’s an element of freedom. In the part of the mind that says, “Okay, well, you can choose to do the right thing right now, but watch out. It’s not going to last very long.” You have to question that. The best way to question it is to choose to do the right thing the next moment, and then the next moment, and then the next moment, and then say, “See? I can do it.” It’ll come back with all kinds of other arguments, but you have to be determined not to listen to them, not to believe them, and try to figure out ways to undercut the part of the mind that does believe. It’s kind of like internal politics. There are certain voices that come screaming at you all the time, and you’ve learned to give in to them, sometimes simply through their force. But if you stop and really look at them, you realize that there’s not much there that you would really like to give in to. So you have to create other voices in the mind. The path is something you create. You put it together. In technical terms, it’s sankhada dhamma. It’s something that you put together. It’s not a question of whether you naturally like it or naturally don’t like it. It’s one of the main common misunderstandings in American Buddhism right now. It’s the sense that you choose whichever path you like. There are paths that work and there are paths that don’t work. And the path that you like isn’t necessarily going to take you to where you really want to go. So there has to be an element of struggle. There has to be an element of putting something new together instead of falling back on old ways. When you stop to think of it, when you fall back on the old ways, it’s an element of construction as well. You are creating that self over and over and over again every time you give in to it. So what kind of self do you want to create? You have the option. And for many of us, we don’t like the responsibility because that means, “Well, if we’re responsible, then we’re going to be responsible for our mistakes.” So you have to ask, “Well, so what? Everybody makes mistakes.” Even the Buddha made mistakes before he became the Buddha. This is where we’re all coming from. This is why sankhanu-siddhi is such a useful contemplation. Sometimes it’s hard to compare ourselves to the Buddha, but you can compare yourselves to other members of the Sangha, people who follow the Buddhist teachings. There are all kinds of people. There were lepers. There were rich people. There were poor people. There were smart people. There was a pair, Mahabandhaka and Jula Bandhaka. Mahabandhaka was the older brother. He was very smart. Jula Bandhaka was the younger brother. He was very dumb. Both of them became arahants. There are all kinds of people in the noble sangha. Everybody in the noble sangha has been where you are right now, in terms of the strengths and weaknesses of your mind. What made the difference was that they finally decided they were going to take apart their image of themselves and build a new one. It’s simply a matter of having the conviction that it can be done. It may seem impossible. Well, they got used to thinking impossible things. After all, the Buddha was told that it was impossible, the idea that there could be a deathless, that there could be something better than what he already had. Here he was, wealthy, good-looking, powerful. He had all the sensual objects and sensual pleasures that anyone could imagine. He still wasn’t satisfied. He said, “There must be something more.” His family and friends said, “Don’t kid yourself. It’s impossible.” “This is as good as it gets.” But he said, “If this is as good as it gets, then life is pretty miserable, because it’s all going to fall apart someday.” So he set out to find the impossible. He found the death, and he found it. So we may not feel up to comparing ourselves to the Buddha. But there are all these noble disciples who also must have at some point in their lives thought, “This must be impossible. True happiness must be an impossible thing. For me to change must be an impossible thing.” But then one day they decided to do the impossible. And that’s how they ended up as members of the noble sangha. The point being, of course, that what we think is impossible is not necessarily impossible. We’ve just allowed ourselves to be limited. I remember when I first ordained, one of the scariest parts of this was all of a sudden it seemed to be that so much more was demanded of me. When you live in normal society, people’s expectations, people’s standards are not all that high. It’s not all that difficult to live up to them. But suddenly, when there’s the possibility of working for the deathless, it seems so overwhelming that there’s part of the mind that wants to run back to the shelter of what seems easier to handle. But, of course, what’s easier to handle also brings on more suffering. As the Buddha said, “Lay life is hard. Life as a renunciate is hard. But at least life as a renunciate takes you to someplace that’s really worth going to.” When you finally make up your mind that you’re really going to train yourself, it makes that goal less of an impossibility. So try to overcome that barrier you have in your mind that deep down in some place says, “I can’t do this.” The question is, “Why?” Why would you want to believe that? Who in your mind is saying that? It’s a part of the mind that doesn’t want to make an effort. Do you want to identify with that part of the mind? You can if you want to, but you don’t have to. You have the opportunity of identifying with better voices in the mind. It’s your choice. No matter how impossible it may seem, it is your choice.

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