Caring About Results

February, 2003

We’ve all heard that piece of advice that we should act in such a way that we’re not attached to the results. And there’s a half-truth in there. But it’s only half a truth. Because, after all, why do we act unless we want results? The most miserable lives in the world are the ones where people act and act and act and do and do and work and work and don’t get any results. It was one time, several years back, I was visiting my father. We decided to go back to Charlottesville, the town we lived in when I was a teenager. We’d built a house there, hired a contractor, put a lot of the work in the house. We did ourselves. As part of the visit, we decided to go back and look at the house. Well, it turns out that the people who had bought the house were not taking care of it. The eaves were actually falling down. Another way back home, back to Williamsburg, Dad made the comment, “Look back on my life. I don’t see that I’ve accomplished anything.” All that work, he went into growing potatoes, and then the government gave him money to throw the potatoes away. The work he’d done as a bureaucrat, which had then been totally wiped out by a change in the administration. And it was really sad. That’s the worst kind of life there is, when you’ve put a lot of effort into something and there’s nothing to show for it. And the half-truth of not being attached to results applies to cases like this, where the results are totally out of your control. But that doesn’t mean you should take that as the general policy for your practice, the general policy for your life. You want to work on things. You want to put your effort into things that do show results, things that are more in your control. After all, we’re sitting here meditating because we have a purpose in mind, true freedom, finding a happiness that’s not subject to change, so that we can look back on our lives and see a life well-lived. All that effort went to a purpose. Even if we don’t attain awakening in this lifetime, at least we’ve developed the qualities of mind that are important, qualities of mind that we can depend on, that’ll carry over into our next opportunity to practice. And even in the area where things are more under control, the half-truth about not being attached to results means that you can’t simply say, “I want the results of all my actions to be good.” If the action is unskillful, you have to accept the fact that the results are not going to be good. Or if you’re working on a skill and haven’t quite mastered it, you have to accept the fact that there’s still work to be done. But you still have to be concerned about the results. Because the results of our actions are the things that we consume. Here in American society, it’s easy to see production and consumption separated. People rarely produce the things they consume. They’re rarely consuming the things they produce. But it’s unnatural. And even if that’s the way the economy is built, it’s not the way our lives are built. We meet up with the results of our actions all the time, both our past actions and our present actions. So it’s only natural that we want the results to be good. But if we’re serious about that, it means we have to make the causes good as well. So you take your desire for results, and you don’t just abandon it. You learn how to use it skillfully. As you’re sitting here meditating, how are you focusing on the breath? Focus your attention on what you’re doing. Engage what you’re doing by the results. If the results aren’t quite what you want yet, keep adjusting, keep adjusting, keep looking at what you’re doing, seeing the connection between what you’re doing and the results that you’re getting. And when the connection isn’t clear, try various different approaches. Experiment. The state of mind you’re experiencing right now or the sensations of the body are the results of past actions. There’s nothing much you can do about them. But you can affect the way you’re relating to them. That’s important. There’s always the possibility of making sure that you’re not suffering, no matter how bad things are on the body, no matter what comes up in the mind. So even if you determine that, say, a pain in the body is not the result of anything you’re doing right now, look at the mind. Is that pain in the body? Is that pain in the mind? If it is, there’s work you can do right here on that aspect. Even if you have to treat the physical pain as a given, the mental pain doesn’t have to be a given. The mental pain is something that you’re working, that you’re creating right now, and you don’t have to. So look into it. What are you doing to build that bridge from the pain in the body into the mind? How are you labeling the pain? How do you perceive the pain? How is that pain related to your body? As the Jhana Mahaprabhu points out, these are the three big issues—body, mind, pain. How do they relate? Can you see where you’re creating connections that don’t have to be there? So it’s important that we really do care about the results of our actions. After all, this is what makes action worthwhile. This is what makes effort worthwhile. Trying to give rise to the results that really are satisfactory, that really do give peace to the mind, give the mind something solid and lasting that it can hold on to. So as we’re practicing here, we’re reconnecting those processes of production and consumption where they matter most in our own immediate experience. This means you should care. You care about the results. You may not be attached to them, but you care. And you do your best. The attachment here meaning, as I said, one, wanting things to be a particular way in circumstances where they simply can’t be that way, because the force is outside of your control. And then two, wanting the results of your actions to come out good even when your actions are not skillful. That kind of attachment is the unskillful attachment, the type you have to let go of. But the desire that we’re working on, the desire that is a basis for power, that is a part of the path, is the desire to get good results in areas where it is possible for you to develop skill. That’s the kind of desire you never want to let go. Because it turns the practice from something that’s aimless, or a simple going-through of the motions, into something that’s focused, your intent on watching what you’re doing, watching the results. This is where practice makes a big difference. You do the same thing over and over and over again. You breathe in, you breathe out again and again, and you watch it again and again and again. Ask questions about what’s happening. Learn to do it more efficiently. What does it mean to be efficient? It means to have no wasted effort, no undesirable consequences. So watch how you’re focusing on the breath. Watch how you stay with the breath. Try to find ways in which you can do it with more finesse, more grace. So when the time comes to settle in on the breath, you’re right there. You don’t overshoot the mark. You don’t undershoot the mark. You’re right on target immediately. And you can stay with the breath in such a way that there’s not a lot of wasted energy. There’s not a lot of unnecessary struggling. Try to hone these skills, and they’ll get you in alignment with the Four Noble Truths and all the other processes that you need to master in order to reach that goal that we all desire. Someone asked during the last week, “How do we know that the end of suffering is a really worthwhile goal? How about other things in life?” We look at the nature of human action, and it’s always to avoid suffering, to work towards something where the effort is worthwhile. You’ve found something that has lasting value, lasting happiness. What the Buddha did was simply look at the nature of human action. The purpose of action, and then follow it through to its logical consequence. What happens if you focus on your actions and really do care about the results? See how far that question can take you. He found that it can take you all the way to the end of suffering. When he teaches us to do that, once you’ve gotten to that point in your own practice, then he said there’s nothing more he needs to teach you. He taught you the skill that he was concerned about. At that point, what you do with the rest of your life is up to you. But as long as you haven’t reached that point, you still don’t understand what you’re doing. You don’t understand what it means to do something, what it means to act. You don’t understand the consequences of your actions. This applies to all of us. It means there’s still work to be done. Fortunately, that work is primarily inward, in an area where you are in control, so that your efforts can show results and they can be lasting. They won’t depend on policies or the government or the rise and fall of nations or the rise and fall of civilizations. It’s something that’s totally within your power to make a difference and to make it last, to make it stick. That’s why effort put into the practice is never wasted. That’s why it’s always the best use of your time.

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