Heightening the Mind

August, 2003

The chant we chanted just now—aging, illness, and death—if you were to talk about those things out in the ordinary, everyday world, people would say, “You’re being morbid. They feel depressed.” But that’s not the purpose of the chant. It’s to induce an attitude of heedfulness. As the final element of the chant says, we have our actions. We’re the owners of our actions. We’re heir to our actions. Whatever we do for good or for evil, to that we fall heir. Action is something we’re always doing, and our actions have their results. It’s a human tendency, though, that when our actions are good, they give the results we want, and when they’re not good, well, they don’t give results. That’s the way we’d like to have it be, but it’s not that way. When our actions are skillful, they result in happiness. When they’re unskillful, they result in unhappiness. We’re constantly producing them, and most of the time we’re pretty heedless, pretty careless, pretty complacent, which means that the life that we shape with our actions is careless, not the kind of life we’d want. So we reflect on aging, illness, and death, and the principle of action to remind us to be heedful. There’s enough suffering in life as it is already. The fact that you’re born, it’s very difficult to get out of this life comfortably, and so much of life is a lesson in lessened expectations. We think about the dream, and we think about the dreams we had as children. How do our lives match up with those dreams? In most cases, they rarely do, hardly ever do. Unfortunately, the Buddha doesn’t ask us to give up on our dreams. He says, “Refocus your dreams. Learn how to dream about the right things. Aim at the right things.” In other words, he says, “Total happiness is possible, but it really requires you to be very careful in your actions.” A couple of months back I was teaching a retreat mentioning this principle of skillfulness. There was a young man who had been practicing in a Zen center. He came up afterwards and said he thought what I was doing was distracting people from the mind’s ability to open up to emptiness, open up to nirvana, right here and now, at any time. Well, the mind just can’t open up like that. If it’s strapped down by its own unskillful actions, they really get in the way. If you want the ultimate skill of learning how to open up to nirvana, you have to work through more ordinary skills, just like mathematics. If you want to learn calculus, you have to go through addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, step by step, before you get to the really subtle skills of calculus. It’s the same with the practice. As the Buddha said, the ultimate skill is the Eightfold Noble Path. It leads to true happiness, but it is a very refined skill. It’s a training in what the Buddhists called “heightened virtue,” “heightened mind,” and “heightened discernment.” Notice the emphasis on “heightened” in each case. We all have some virtue, some concentration, some discernment in our daily lives. It’s not that we’re out there killing all the time or stealing all the time. In terms of concentration, we have enough concentration to read books, follow an argument, listen to a piece of music. As for discernment, we have the ordinary, everyday discernment that teaches us basic common sense. Act in ways that are not harmful to yourself and others. On a general level, these factors are already there in our lives. What the Buddha wants us to do to train ourselves is to heighten them, because the skill of going to true happiness is a heightened skill. So we take these qualities, which in many cases seem pretty ordinary, like the basic factors of practicing concentration, mindfulness, and alertness. Mindfulness means simply keeping something in mind, and it’s something we do all the time—sometimes skillfully, sometimes not. As for alertness, we do have to watch what’s going on around us to some extent. Those qualities are awfully basic. What the Buddha says is that you take these really basic, basic qualities and you work on them, and they take you farther than you might imagine they could go. So as we practice meditation, it’s not that we’re working with anything exotic. We’re working with the basic components or the basic activities of the mind, simply learning to do them with more and more precision and more and more consistency. In other words, to heighten virtue, you make it consistent. You make up your mind you’re going to follow the precepts. If you can’t manage all five, you start out with number four, which is the precept against lying. Then you make sure that you just don’t misrepresent the truth when you speak at all—under no conditions will you misrepresent the truth. That takes a basic principle and it heightens it, brings it up to a new level. Same with mindfulness and alertness as you practice meditation. Our mindfulness tends to be in fits and starts. It goes for a little while and then there’s a gap, and then it goes for a little while with something else and there’s another gap, leaping around like this. So to heighten it, you give it one thing to do and you’re consistent. When you get to the points where there’d normally be gaps or pauses in the mindfulness, you just barrel right through those gaps. You don’t stop where you ordinarily would. You push it. You push it until it connects up again, and then you try to keep it connected this way. Then you find that that simple act of taking a very basic mental skill like this and being more and more consistent with it really heightens the skill, brings it up to a new level, and you find you can do things with it that you couldn’t have done before. The same with discernment, the ability to see connections between things. We ordinarily think of discernment, especially if we’ve read some books on Buddhism that involve the three characteristics. Well, the three characteristics have to have their place within the teachings on causality, within the teachings on action. The Buddha once said that if you want to gain discernment, the first thing you do is you go to a person who seems to be practicing wisely, and you ask that person, “What, if I do it, will be for my long-term benefit and happiness? What, when I do it, will be for my long-term suffering and misery?” It’s a basic, wise question. It seems pretty ordinary, but when you take it apart, you discover there are some important elements there. One starts with an emphasis on your own action, your ability to make a difference in your life. Stay focused on that all the time. The Buddha’s analysis of causality and his analysis of the experience of things in the present moment comes down to input from your past karma, your present actions, which are your intentions, and the results of your present actions. There’s always an element of your participation in every moment. What you do in the training is to learn how to be alive to that element and also to work on doing it skillfully. This happens all the time, every moment of the day. You’re putting something into that experience of the moment. If you’re alert to the fact that you can really make a difference by the way you give input into the more present moment, you really want to focus on that. So you focus on what you’re doing, what you’re doing, what you can do to make a difference, what you can do to make it better. Then there’s the phrase “my long-term welfare and happiness.” If you think about it a minute, you see that it corresponds to the three characteristics. Long-term is measured up against the teachings on inconstancy. Welfare and happiness is measured up against the teachings on stress and suffering. And the “my” in there is measured up against the teachings on not-self. In other words, anything that falls into the characteristics of inconstancy, stress, and not-self is not the ultimate answer to that question. It means you have to dig further, be more precise in learning to be skillful. As you follow it all the way through, ultimately you find that the answer, nirvana, is nothing that you do anymore. You can work that way, and you take responsibility for your actions. Don’t drop your sense of self too quickly. Take responsibility for your actions. You work with things that are relatively comfortable and relatively long-term as we work in the developing concentration. Even though it’s not the ultimate, it is the path, and while you’re on the path, it feels good to be here. You get into deeper stages of concentration, longer periods of concentration, working at it so that when you get up from the sitting right here, you’re not disturbed. Concentration doesn’t get disturbed. It’s like learning how to balance a bowl full of oil. You learn not only how to sit still with this full bowl of oil, but you learn how to get up so it doesn’t spill. You learn how to walk around so it doesn’t spill. And then as you get more and more skillful, you can do more and more interesting things and still keep the bowl of oil balanced without spilling a drop. That’s heightened concentration or heightened mind. When you use that state of concentration to peel away your attachments to other things, in other words, you compare the sense of well-being, the sense of stability, that comes from the concentration, and then you compare that with the other kinds of happiness you could develop doing other things, and you really see that there’s no comparison at all. The concentration is much more satisfying going much deeper into the mind. This in and of itself helps peel away a lot of attachments to unskillful thoughts and unskillful practices. And then you learn to turn around and take apart your attachment to the concentration. You discover that even though it may seem long-term, it’s still in constant. There are ups and downs. Even though it may seem pleasurable, peaceful, or rapturous, there’s still a slight element of stress in there. And although you’ve been identifying with it, after a while you begin to realize that you can’t identify with it anymore because of the stress, because of the ups and downs. That’s when you learn to incline the mind to something even more unconditioned, to something that absolutely is unconditioned. That’s where you totally transcend the framework of that question you asked. This is how you bring your discernment up to a heightened level. So in all these cases—heightened virtue, heightened mind, heightened discernment—you start out with your ordinary, everyday virtue, concentration, and discernment that we all have, but you work on strengthening them, making them more consistent, making them more refined. You make them stronger. And as you bring them to a higher level, you see that they can do things you wouldn’t have imagined otherwise. The simple act of being mindful, keeping something in mind, the simple act of being alert, watching things—those are lessons you got from your parents when you were small. And as with so many important things we learn when we’re small, we tend to overlook them as we get more interested in other things, more conscious. More complex things, more abstruse things, things that seem more challenging and less ordinary. But when you finally come down to it, it’s these ordinary skills that can truly become extraordinary if you focus on them, if you make them more consistent, stronger, more continuous. So this is the training we’re involved in as we meditate. And as we practice the teachings in all aspects of our lives, taking qualities of the mind, qualities of our behavior, which may seem very ordinary and unremarkable, and then developing them, see how far they can go. And as the Buddha said, you can’t even imagine. There are no words to describe how far these things can take you. They become that remarkable as they’re heightened. So even though when you’re meditating you seem to get tied up in just simple mechanics of how to keep the mind with the breath, how to bring it back skillfully, you may wonder, “Well, when do the remarkable things come?” Well, they don’t come until you take these very ordinary skills you’re working on and strengthen them. Then they become remarkable.

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