Long-term Welfare

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Buddha once said that the quest for wisdom, the quest for discernment, starts with a question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” This may sound strange because we’re used to hearing the Buddha’s take on discernment, his take on insight, as it deals with the incoming constancy, stress, not self—which sounds like the very opposite of happiness. But it’s not. It’s part of that quest. Look at that question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” It starts with the realization that happiness is something that you have to do. It’s something that you have to bring about. It doesn’t come floating in on its own. What seems to come floating in on its own is happiness comes from past actions. But that kind of happiness just comes and goes, comes and goes. There’s nothing really reliable about it. But when you realize that there’s something you can do, you can make a difference with your actions, that’s when discernment starts. The next part of discernment is looking for long-term happiness, one that’s worth the effort you put into it. If you put a lot of effort into happiness and get only a slight taste and then it goes, it’s not really worth it. So you look at the kind of happiness that lasts. This is what the path is all about. We develop generosity. We develop virtue. And we meditate. It has ways of bringing about long-term happiness. The happiness that comes from giving lasts a lot longer than the happiness that comes from taking. It goes deeper. The same holds true for the happiness that comes from holding to your principles. If you can gain a kind of happiness that comes from breaking your principles, you pay a big price. It’s not worth it. But even with the happiness that comes from virtue and concentration, if you haven’t developed the qualities of mind that teach you how to deal properly with happiness, it can turn into a cause for suffering. This is why we meditate, to give the mind a deeper basis for its happiness. Look at the Four Noble Truths. They start with the fact that there is suffering. Sometimes they seem to be about nothing but suffering, but the Third Noble Truth is the end of suffering. The Fourth Noble Truth is a path to the end of suffering. And part of that path, right concentration, includes pleasure and rapture, the pleasure and rapture that come from having the mind absorbed in a single object. This is the kind of pleasure, this is the kind of well-being or happiness that forms the path, something we work on. Once the mind gets settled in with that sense of well-being, then you can turn and look at the other things that you ordinarily chase after for the sake of your happiness, and you begin to see that they’re awfully fleeting, that they’re really not worth the effort. This is where the contemplation of the Three Characteristics comes in, thinking about things that are inconstant and stressful, not-self. As we’re saying this afternoon, if you do this contemplation without a good, solid basis and concentration, it gets threatening, it’s very depressing, and it all becomes very negative. But if you’re coming from the point of view of having the strength of concentration, sense of well-being, you can look at these other things that you used to chase after, and you realize you don’t really want to. It’s not worth it. You find it a lot easier to let them go. So the contemplation of the Three Characteristics is designed to refine your happiness, help you to stay more and more consistently with a happiness that’s solid, secure. So as you develop in concentration, don’t worry about being attached to it. It’s an important attachment. If you don’t have this to hold on to, it’s difficult to let go of other things. So I say, “What’s wrong with going to the Brahman worlds?” Even non-returners go to the Brahman worlds. At any rate, being reborn as a Brahman is better than being reborn as a dog. That’s what happens to people when they just start getting on the negative side of insight. It all becomes very critical, very nitpicking, and they start focusing on each other’s faults. And who knows? They could very easily be reborn as dogs. You need to have a sense of well-being to hold on to before you can let go of other attachments. Otherwise, when you let go of, say, your attachment to sensual pleasures, you start holding on to your attachment to your views. And that can be very strong, very tenacious. And yet those are things we have to learn how to let go of as well. We learn how to use our views, but we don’t use them to hit each other over the head. So the only way to let go of, say, your attachments to sights and smells and sounds and tastes and tactile sensations is to give the mind a good sense of well-being just by breathing. So that when you’re letting go, you’re not letting go with a sense of loss. You’re letting go with a sense that you already have enough. You’ve got something better. You don’t need those things anymore. It’s like a person growing up. You look at the things that used to give you pleasure as a child, and you realize that they no longer have any substance. What you do as you practice is you learn how to outgrow your attachments by giving yourself better and better things to hold on to. So this is why we have the teachings on the five aggregates, the three characteristics. You take whatever pleasure you’re looking for and depending on, and you take it apart and see what it’s made out of. And the more carefully you look at it, the more you realize that there’s really nothing there, the building blocks for this big edifice of your happiness. The Buddha compares them to foam floating down a river, or bubbles that appear on a river when the rain falls. They come and they go, they come and they go, like a mirage, like a magic trick. The more carefully you look at them, the less is there. They’re very unsubstantial. The way they seem substantial is because of the buildup we give to them, the labels we place on them, the anticipation we have that this pleasure is going to be really good, this pleasure is going to be really satisfying. You put a lot of effort into it and you hold on to that expectation. Then when the actual pleasure comes and it’s not nearly as satisfying as you thought it might be, then you hold on to the idea that it was. Just to convince yourself that it was all worth it. You’ve invested so much, you don’t want to see your investment vanish away like that. So there’s a basic dishonesty in the mind, in the way we normally look for pleasure, normally look for happiness. What we’re trying to do is analyze things into the five khandhas and look at the characteristics of those five khandhas. To see how inconstant they are, how stressful they are, and how they’re not really you or yours. It’s to learn how to be more honest with ourselves about what we’re doing and the results of what we’ve done. Again, we do this because we’ve learned how to look for pleasure in better ways, more lasting ways. Ultimately we get to the point where you can let go of those other attachments, and the only attachment you have left is the attachment to concentration. If you look at that carefully, then you begin to see that that, too, is made up of the same aggregates, only they’re more subtle. But it’s the same building blocks. That’s when you learn how to let go of your attachment to this as well. But in the meantime, don’t be in a great hurry to overcome your attachment to concentration. Many people think they’ve practiced concentration once or twice and say, “Ah, yes, concentration is inconstant, stressful, and not self. It doesn’t last.” And think they’ve gone beyond it. That’s short-circuiting the practice. It’s like being given a ladder to take you up to happiness, and you chop the ladder up. It’s self-defeating. So, as you’re focusing on your concentration, don’t be afraid of being attached to it. It’s supposed to be good. It’s supposed to be attractive. In fact, you want to spend a lot of time tailoring your concentration so it does really feel good for you. The Buddha talks about using concentration to gladden the mind, to steady the mind, to release the mind. And it’s in the course of learning how to use the concentration so it really feels good for whatever ails you. For example, if you’re feeling tired, there are certain ways of concentrating that give you more energy. If you’re feeling stressed out, there are other ways of focusing on the breath, adjusting the breath, so it’s more relaxing. When things feel dry and disappointing, there are certain ways of focusing on the breath so it’s really fulfilling. It feels really, really good deep down inside. It’s learning how to adjust your concentration so that it can balance out whatever’s wrong, either in the body or in the mind. That’s the skill that you need to develop in concentration. A lot of people think there is just one state of concentration or one way of experiencing each of the levels of jhana. That’s not the case. Depending on what state the body is in, what state the mind is in, you’re going to need different types of concentration, different ways of playing with the concentration in order to make it really gratifying, to release you from whatever sense of discomfort or dis-ease you have, and to steady the mind in different situations. That’s the skill of concentration. It’s something we want to work on, to really familiarize ourselves with what this state of mind can do, so that we find that it is more and more something we can rely on. And as our concentration gets better, we’re less and less attached to having our external role in a particular way. You start out, you need things to be quiet, you like certain circumstances in terms of the people around you, the society in which you’re living, because your concentration is still one-dimensional. But as you make it more multi-dimensional, you find that you can practice it in any situation. Monks, forest monks, go out into the forest to test themselves in different situations. Can they keep the mind under control in places of physical hardship, in places of danger? Jon Foon tells about how one time he went to visit a Jon Lee, who at that point was teaching in Bangkok. He’d been out in the forest. His mind was doing very well in the forest. He came in to see a Jon Lee, and he said, “One night in Bangkok, the monastery where Jon Lee was staying was right next to a railroad track.” One night of being right next to a railroad track had destroyed his meditation. He realized that there was more he had to learn. And so he worked on meditating in less-than-ideal circumstances. He found that that forced him to become more and more skillful in how he approached the concentration, how he approached his breath. So simply getting the mind into concentration is not enough. You want to learn how to really use it, how to adjust it, how to master the concentration. So it’s good for whatever situation you’re in. It can provide you a refuge wherever you are. Only then, after you really learn how to depend on it, that’s when you want to look at what’s even better. It comes a point where even the stillness of concentration is not enough. You want something even more still, less burdensome than that. And that’s when you start taking it apart. But until then, work on putting it together in every situation. Even after people have gained awakening, they still have their concentration. It’s not that they abandon it forever. It’s just that they use it as a dwelling place for the mind, as a resting spot for the mind. It’s a skill they’ve mastered, and so they know when to use it and when to put it aside. So don’t be in too great of a hurry. Don’t be in a hurry to get past the concentration. It’s there to help you, both to give you a sense of well-being in the present moment and to form the basis for insight, or insight that’s solid, so that when you let go, you let go out of a sense of simple dispassion. Not aversion, but dispassion. Two very different things. So no matter how much work the concentration may involve, it’s there to help you. It’s all worth it. And don’t think that it’s a case of working on nothing but concentration and then working on insight. The insight goes together with the concentration as you get more and more refined in your sense of what true pleasure is, what true well-being is, and what you can do to attain long-term well-being. That one question carries you all the way through. What, when I do it, will be for my long-term welfare and happiness? It’s the beginning and it’s the guide for insight all the way through.

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