Big-heartedness

February 24, 2004

Being constant in practice is what keeps the practice alive. We know that one of the focal teachings has to do with inconstancy, the inconstancy of form, feeling, all the aggregates. But that’s not an instruction for us to be inconstant. You have to stick with the practice, because if you want a constant happiness, you have to make the cause of factors constant. If you want something to depend on, you have to be dependable. This means you have to approach the practice as a skill. It’s not hit or miss. In the beginning, many times it seems hit or miss, but as you stick with it, you begin to see patterns. Those patterns are important, because seeing those patterns is what allows you to get more constant in the practice, to get better and better results. You have to be observant, take stock of what you’re doing. Sometimes we’re told that we have to have an attitude of acceptance, equanimity, regarding the results in meditation, and that’s part of it. Acceptance is there to admit what’s actually going on so we don’t get into denial. But simply admitting to yourself that your practice is lousy doesn’t accomplish anything. If you see that it’s lousy, you have to figure out why. You’re not being judgmental in saying that it’s lousy. You’re being true to yourself. You’re being clear-sighted. After all, the whole purpose of the practice is to find a stable, solid happiness. If it’s not coming, something is wrong. So look at what you’re doing. Take stock of what you’re doing. Try focusing on the breath in one way. See what happens. If that doesn’t work well, try focusing on another way. Vary the breath. Vary the point in the body where you focus your attention. Notice the strength of your focus. Sometimes it’s too heavy, sometimes it’s too light. But the important thing is that you’re constantly observant. When you see something that gives better results, you go with that. That’s basic intelligence. I once translated a book for John Sawatt. It’s a Dhamma book which explained that the Buddha doesn’t teach us to abandon craving, but simply to learn how to accept craving as a natural part of being a human being. When I got to that point, he said, “The writer is teaching people to be stupid.” You don’t stop with acceptance. Acceptance simply means admitting what’s there. Once you admit what’s there, then you have to ask yourself, “Is that what you really want?” If it’s not what you really want, then what are you going to do to make things better? That desire to make things better is not a cause of suffering. It’s actually part of the path. Equanimity in accepting things has its uses, but it’s not the be-all and end-all. Once you accept things, then you work to make them better. You see them for what they are. For the purpose of understanding cause and effect and how you can get better and better at cause and effect. If this means having goals in the practice, fine. We need to have goals. Without goals, you wonder what you’re doing here. It’s simply a question of learning to be mature in our attitude towards our goals, realizing that the goal of a true happiness is something that’s going to take time, requires persistence, requires patience, requires equanimity, requires using your ingenuity. All of your mental faculties, and they all have to develop. It’s like a tree that has lots of branches. When all the branches are growing, they tend to grow slowly. If we’re a tree with one branch or just one shoot, say, like a banana tree, that grows fast. But the banana trees that grow fast tend to die fast as well. They provide their one bunch of bananas. That’s it. Whereas trees that have lots of branches and grow slowly can provide shade for years and years and years. So we’re involved in a process that’s going to take time. Even though it’s appealing to focus on approaches that promise shortcuts, they’re going to get you in touch with the unconditioned right away. You have to ask yourself, “If it were so easy, why isn’t everybody there?” Especially when you hear that the unconditioned is then something that you have to develop, something you have to work with, something you have to learn how to stay in touch with. If it’s unconditioned, you can’t develop it. It’s there, in and of itself. If it’s something that you have to develop, it’s not the unconditioned. It’s part of the path. You work on it. It’s not the goal. If you mistake the path for the goal, you’re like the Buddhist teachers, the very first teachers you went to see. They had very large, formless states of awareness, a state of nothingness, which is not blanking out. It’s just a sense that nothing is happening right here, right now. There seem to be no causal factors. Or a state of neither perception or non-perception that’s even more spacious, more refined, formless attainment. They thought those were the goals, so they just sat there. It’s like getting to a path and just sitting down on the path. Getting to a road and just sitting down on the road. That’s dangerous. You might get run over. At the very least, you never get to where the road can take you. Because it does go someplace, as the Buddha said. It goes to the total end of suffering. It’s a big goal, and so you have to have a big heart in practicing it. A big heart in terms of lots of patience, lots of endurance, lots of persistence. A big heart is manifested in a lot of ways throughout your daily life. Patience in dealing with other people. Endurance in dealing with other people. Ingenuity. You see this around the monastery. The people who notice what needs to be done and do it, as opposed to the people who have to be told. It’s the big-heartedness that makes the big difference in the path. The big-heartedness in terms of patience, persistence, equanimity. All the factors. All the faculties of the mind. The heart and mind. In Thailand, the words “heart” and “mind” are used interchangeably. They don’t see a radical distinction between the two. It’s useful when you’re practicing not to see any radical distinction. We sometimes think of the mind up in the head as the calculating faculty, whereas the heart is the emotional faculty. If they’re separated like this, both tend to atrophy. But if you see them as part of the same thing, that intelligence is not simply a matter of figuring things out. It’s a matter of learning which qualities in the mind are really good and which are bad ones, and working on developing them. Having the right set of values, the right set of attitudes, requires a kind of largeness of heart and mind together. When they’re working together like this, the whole heart and the whole mind get developed. And they do go in a specific direction as they develop. Because it’s organic, it requires patience to watch. You can’t have too many preconceived notions ahead of time. But you also shouldn’t abort the process by saying, “Well, it’s simply what’s already there. We just learn to accept what’s already there.” That kills the practice. The practice consists in knowing that you have a goal, having a good general sense of the direction in which it goes, and then doing the step-by-step-by-step work that that requires. Having the patience to stick with it when it goes slowly, but the persistence to make sure it’s not going slowly because of your laziness. It requires balance. It requires a sense of proportion in what you’re doing. Sticking with the practice also involves having an understanding of the practice, so that when things get tough, you can cheer yourself up, give yourself wise advice, so you don’t stray off the path or just sit down in the middle of the path. But you find your own inner resources to keep yourself going. Even though we live in a world of things that are inconstant, stressful, and not-self, we develop a faculty of constancy in our mind. We find an inner sense of ease. We learn to rely on ourselves. So the ideas of constancy, ease, self—these do have a value. These do have a place in the practice. Ultimately, there comes a point where you let them go. But as long as the mind needs them, it needs a sense of ease in the practice in order to satisfy its craving. There’s a passage in the Canada where the Buddha talks about craving and conceit as being helpful in the practice. The craving to find that true happiness, the conceit that says, “If other people can do it, so can I.” As long as the mind has these faculties, learn how to use them wisely so you can stick with the practice. When the time comes to let them go, then you let them go. Don’t abort things too fast. As long as we have craving and conceit, we need them in order to stick with the practice. But it involves learning how to use them wisely. The craving to have to be done with it all, or the conceit that says, “I’m already there,” that’s an unskillful use of these faculties, these mental habits. But if you look at your life and you say, “It’s still not satisfactory. There’s still an element of stress. There’s still an element of things that are inconstant and undependable.” The craving that wants to find something better than that, the conceit that says, “I can do something better than that,” those are useful uses of these mental faculties, mental habits. And you use them until they no longer serve any purpose. That’s when you can let them go. So even though things around us may be inconstant and undependable, try to find the resources within that will make us constant, that will make us dependable in our practice, so we can find that dimension in the mind where things are extraordinary. They don’t just follow the ordinary ways of the world. It’s something special. It’s there, but it also requires something special from us in order for us to find it.

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