Appreciating the Path

September 13, 2004

If you were to open your eyes now and look around you, everything you see would be a gift. The building was sitting in all the paraphernalia on the altar. The flowers, the mats, the sitting mats, everything was given by someone. We’re living in generosity here. For the monks, everything you’re wearing was a gift. Everything you use is a gift. Your bodies have been made out of food that was a gift. They say that in seven years, every cell of your body has changed. It’s been replaced. So if you’ve been ordained more than seven years, your whole body is a result of food that was a gift. So how do you repay these gifts? The obvious repayment is through the practice. A very practical one, though, is that you treat everything around you with respect. We know that things are going to break down, things are going to get used up, but you try to keep them going as long as possible. Have sympathy for the donor, because each gift is a sacrifice. And think about your own heart. When you’re giving something, you want it to last. You want lots of people to get use out of it. So try to be frugal. Be careful with the things around you. Every time you handle a gift, be careful and remind yourself you’re handling a gift—someone’s hope for happiness. So treat it with care. But the real reward for the gift, or the real repayment for the gift, as I say, is in your practice. So treat the gift with care. And do that with care as well. You want your practice to last. On the one hand, you want it to be a practice you can live with. So you have to find your own rhythm. As the Chan-li says, some people are like banana trees. They grow very fast. Other people are more like oak trees. They grow very slowly. But once they’ve grown, they offer a lot more shade. So as you approach the practice, one of the important skills is learning how to make it livable, a practice that you can live with day in and day out, day in and day out. After all, the practice is an opportunity. Don’t think of it as a burden. We’re not here to just simply fit into somebody else’s culture. I mean, there is the culture, what they call the culture of the noble ones. It’s a series of values. Notice how three of the principles of the culture, the customs of the noble ones, deal with material objects. Being content with whatever food you get, whatever clothing you get, with whatever shelter you get. Don’t be proud of your contentment. Learn to use these things in a way that you get the most use out of them, without getting attached to them. The fourth quality is delighting in developing and delighting in letting go. Learning how to take delight in your practice. That’s what makes it livable. Remind yourself of what a rare opportunity is. One, to have a place where you’re allowed to practice like this, and two, to be surrounded by other people who share similar values. This is pretty rare in a world like this. In most of human society, it’s common that people lie and steal and cheat, try to get ahead through character assassination. Every kind of nastiness you can imagine is out there. This is the opportunity where you can get away from that and really look into yourself. Develop the good qualities inside you. Learn how to let go of the unskillful qualities inside you. The custom that we’re trying to develop here is the custom of delighting in this. Because when you delight in it, then you can live with it for a long time. Notice the Buddha’s instructions to Rahula. He said, “If you realize that you’ve made a mistake, make a vow not to repeat that mistake. If you realize you’ve done something right, take delight in it. Be glad that you’ve done something good. Be glad that you’re continuing with the training and your training is beginning to show results, or is continuing to show results.” A lot of what this comes down to is learning how to give yourself encouragement and not feel funny about it. It’s an important skill. Every task that takes a long period of time requires a lot of mental fortitude and confidence. That can come only if you learn how to strengthen yourself. I was reading a series of interviews with Richard Feynman. He was talking about one of the qualities you realize that he had to have if he was going to tackle a particular problem and see it through was the sense that he had something special to offer the problem. So ask yourself, what special things do you have to offer the practice? It’s not that we’re coming here with totally void of any background in good qualities. We all have our own good qualities. Learn how to bring them to bear. This is not one of those meditation systems where they ask you to totally turn off all of your mental functions and just simply do one mechanical process without allowing yourself to think, without allowing yourself to evaluate. You need to bring all of your mental faculties, all the good qualities your mind can bear, in terms of persistence, ingenuity, imagination, meticulousness. Every type of good quality the mind can have is required for the meditation. It’s simply a matter of learning when to use them at the right time. So remind yourself, you’ve got something special to offer the practice. Learn how to maximize your good qualities and develop that ability to stick with a task and enjoy it while you’re doing it. This is a particular talent that’s hard to find in the modern world. Everything gets done so fast, so quickly, that most people aren’t used to long-term tedious projects. Tedious not in the sense of boring, but simply the things you have to do over and over and over again, the small steps that add up to a big accomplishment. Because there’s so little of this, we don’t understand the psychology of sticking with something for long periods of time, how to make it enjoyable, how to make it a game. If you have any of that in your background, it’ll bring it to bear on the practice. If you don’t, learn how to develop it, because it’s what’s going to see you through. This quality of persistence, the ability to keep at something. Someone asked me the other day if I could tell whether a candidate was going to work out or not. This quality of persistence is the one thing you can’t see immediately. Some people don’t look all that promising, but they’ve got the persistence. Other people look very promising, but they don’t have it. It’s something that can be tested over time, but it’s also something that can be developed over time. If you learn how to take delight in developing good qualities of the mind, learn how to take delight in abandoning unskillful ones. It’s a delightful practice we have here, and it’s a rare opportunity. When the days seem long and the practice seems onerous, remember that it’s an opportunity. Few people in the world have this opportunity. There’s a famous story about the monk out in his hut in the forest. Off in the distance, he hears the music of a holiday in a nearby village. He feels miserable there. They knew how to have a good time, and here he is, just miserable, all by himself, with nothing to show for all this time he’s been meditating. As Deva reads his mind, she comes down and says, “Look, there are lots of beings out there who really envy you, because the path you’re following is one that goes up, and the path that most of the world is following goes down.” It’s a part of learning how to delight in the practice. Remind yourself where this is going. It’s going to the end of suffering. It has a direction. Most people’s lives don’t have much of a direction. This one does. It involves developing skills that you can be proud of, skills that can see you through all the way to the end of life and beyond. It’s a rare path. It, too, is a gift to life, just like the things around us. The Buddha found the way to this happiness. You don’t have to tell anybody. In fact, they tell the story that, originally, he felt discouraged at the prospect of teaching anybody, because, one, it was so subtle, and two, because it went so much against the grain. But then he realized there would be people who would benefit. So he spent forty-five years walking around northern India, teaching this path, going wherever there were people who were ready to learn. So this path, too, is a gift. Learn how to treat it with care. Treat it so it lasts a long time, that you stick with it for a long time, however long is needed. Because it’s a gift that comes straight from the heart of the Buddha. So treat his intentions in giving this gift with care.

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