Noble Aspiration, A

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The Buddha once said that the aspirations of a principled person tend to come true. What this means is that it’s not simply the aspiration on its own that’s going to bring about what you want. It has to have a basis in reality, a basis in your actions. The combination of the two is important. But of the two, it’s the actual actions that make all the difference. There’s another point where he said, “If you actually follow the path, then it doesn’t make a difference whether you are aspiring all the way to nirvana or not. The fact that you’re following the path correctly will lead you there.” So it’s like the difference between trying to get all the oil out of gravel and oil out of sesame seeds. If you’re grinding, grinding away at the gravel, then whether you have an aspiration for oil or don’t have an aspiration for oil, you’re still not going to get the oil, because you’re doing the wrong thing. You’re grinding the wrong thing. However, if you’re grinding away at sesame seeds, you’re going to get the oil, whether you’ve made an aspiration to get the oil or not. But still, it’s important that you have a sense of what you’re doing and why you’re doing it. If you didn’t really want oil, then why would you be sitting there grinding away at the sesame seeds? Someplace in there, there’s got to be the desire. So when you think about what you’re going to do with your life, you’re going to think about it. It’s important that you consider all the possibilities. The Buddha said, “One of the possibilities is putting an end to aging, illness, and death.” Someone sent us an old biography of the Buddha. It was written back in the twenties. One of the statements of the young Prince Siddhartha is, “If there is a possibility for an ageless, deathless state, then you have to go for it.” How can people content themselves with going through the same old cycle of aging, illness, and death over and over again? It sounds like wisdom to content yourself with the common lot of human beings, but he said, “Anyone with a real heart must feel that there must be something better.” Yet all too often we hear teachers talk about this today, saying, “Content yourself with the fact that joy comes in very brief moments, and be mindful to squeeze the most out of the moments.” But they don’t offer much more hope than that. Whereas what the young Prince was aiming at was something much higher, something that goes a lot deeper. There is that possibility of putting an end to suffering, he said. At that point, it was simply a conviction. Later on, he found that it was true. For us, we hear the news of his life, and for us it’s just a conviction. But many people have followed his path and found that it really goes there. That’s what they say. So the question is, are you going to open your life to that possibility or not? If you are, he laid out the path. And given the nature of the goal, which has two aspects, the path has two aspects as well. The goal, as he said, is timeless. It’s always present. So you read depictions of the path where it’s simply through a certain brief insight that cuts all the way through to the experience of nirvana. But on the other hand, he says, nirvana is the subtle, the very hard to see. It may be present, but it’s often awfully hard to find. That’s why the practice has its gradual aspect as well. You’re building up your discernment with time. Over time, you get more and more precise, more and more sensitive, more and more discerning. And that can only come with practice. There’s a sutta where the Buddha talks about seven facets of what you need to know. They include knowing the Dhamma, knowing its meaning. Those are things that you can be taught in terms of words. The remainder are things that you can only learn from experience. Having a sense of yourself, having a sense of the proper time, having a sense of enough. In other words, having a sense of yourself means knowing what your strengths are, what your weaknesses are, what needs to be worked on, what you can rely on as your support, the strengths you’ve developed. These you can know only through experience, only through testing, testing yourself in different situations. Having a sense of the right time, the right time to push the practice, the right time to go a little bit more, give yourself a little bit more leeway to rest. The time when you have to very actively work with problems in the mind and the other times when you have to simply just watch them in order to learn about them. Gaining a sense of the time in this way, again, requires practice. It’s a form of discernment that you develop over time through trial and error, exploring different possibilities. This is why the practice is gradual. Having a sense of enough, one of the times to feed the needs of the body, one of the times to go without. When you have to sleep, when you should do without sleep. These are things you can learn only by observation, and observation takes time. It’s a gradual process. You pick up little insights here and there. The final two qualities have to do with other people. One is having a sense of the society in which you are. In this group of people you should talk in that way, you should act in that way. In that group of people you should talk in this way, you should act in this way. You can get some guidance from other people, but a lot of times you have to watch, you have to be observant. Again, that’s the kind of discernment that builds up over time. Then there’s a sense of people you should hang around with, people you should associate with. That’s something that takes time. As the Buddha said, you can’t know another person’s virtue unless you stay with that person and watch them carefully for long periods of time. You have to be observant and you have to take time. You can’t know another person’s purity unless you’ve had dealings with that person. Again, you have to be observant and this takes time. You can’t know another person’s power of endurance until you’ve seen them in difficult situations. You can’t know another person’s discernment until you’ve seen how that person approaches difficult questions. All this requires that you be observant and that you take time. In all this, the practice is going to be gradual. It takes time, it takes your powers of observation, and many of the insights you gain will just be little tiny steps. But as the Buddha said, don’t underestimate the little things. They can sometimes make a big difference. Sometimes just digging a little here, digging a little there, you come across a vein of diamond ore. And the digging isn’t any different from the digging that previously would give you only granite and other kinds of rock. But you just happen to hit the right spot. At the same time, your tools have been getting better over time. Many times people approach the practice by thinking, “Well, this must be the right practice. I’m going to do this one little practice here.” And it works for a while and then it stops. They say, “That must not be it,” and they throw it away. Then they try another one. They find another one that seems to work for a while, and then they pursue it as if it were the only practice. And then it stops yielding results, so they throw it away. You don’t want to throw these things away. You’ve learned something from the different approaches. Maybe those approaches that you threw away may come in useful again some other time, sometimes changing the focal point in your body. It gives all kinds of new insights. You suddenly think, “This must be the right focal point.” Well, maybe right for now, right for this situation. Be alive to that possibility, so you don’t get discouraged when it’s done its work and it’s not working in other situations. This is part of having a gradual path, testing things, finding the limitations of different approaches. But also finding their uses. So even though the deathless is there already, as the Buddha said, it’s timeless, always relevant, as we chant every night, “Akaliko, Akaliko.” Still, it’s subtle and it’s very hard to see, and that requires that you train your discernment. This is what all the aspects of the path are for—to train your discernment, to give it strength, to give it precision. Even the really basic practices of generosity and virtue are there to train your discernment. As you get more and more discerning in your gifts—what to give, whom to give it to, what motivation you should be acting on, what kind of giving doesn’t harm you, doesn’t harm the recipient, doesn’t harm anybody around you, what needs to be done to overcome periods of greed, periods of fear that you’re not going to have enough—all of this requires discernment. Same with virtue. You make a vow that you’re going to follow certain principles, and then you suddenly discover difficulties that come up. How are you going to get around those difficulties and not compromise your principles? For example, someone asks you a question and you know that the truth would really hurt that person and give rise to greed, anger, and delusion in that person. You don’t want to tell the truth, but you don’t want to lie. How do you get around it? That requires discernment. That requires ingenuity. We practice concentration. It hones our powers of discernment so that we get sharper and sharper and have a more solid basis from which to act. All this is a gradual process. It’s important that you not give up, because the aspiration not to come back and suffer is an important one, but it requires major retraining of our habits. It’s not just an empty aspiration, but it’s an aspiration that you actually act on. You are grinding sesame seeds here. You’re not grinding gravel. In this particular case, it’s a lot more difficult than just getting oil. So learn how to relate to the gradualness of the path in a mature way. Learn to value the small steps, the small insights that come along the way, not overestimating them, but at the same time not deprecating them, seeing that they all play their part and learning to appreciate them. Accept that the path is one that’s good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end. It doesn’t matter how long it takes, because the goal is something that speaks to our true desires, our true aspirations, the most noble aspirations of our heart. Something that big requires your whole life, not in the sense of how many years it’s going to take, but in devoting yourself to it entirely, ordering the rest of your life around it. So the aspiration does bear fruit. It’s backed up by the causes that will lead to the effects that we want. So keep at it with all the discernment you can muster.

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