Worldly Effort

November 12, 2004

Life takes effort. The ending of suffering takes effort. The question is, which effort are you going to focus on? Just keeping alive or putting an end to suffering? Because, of course, keeping alive requires dealing with suffering, trying to minimize it. But the question is, how far are you going to go? We like to think that if we get skillful enough in the way we lead our lives, then we can get beyond suffering and yet still hold on to things that we like in life. And it’s that compromise. That keeps us spinning around and around and makes it impossible to put an end. Everybody comes to the Dhamma looking for a compromise, hoping that they can find the compromise. This idea wasn’t invented by Americans. It’s the way everybody comes. We all come with our attachments, we all come with our preconceived notions, hoping that we can hold on to this, hold on to that, so we can have our cake and eat it, too. But it’s the nature of life, it’s the nature of causality, that you can’t find perfection within the causal system. Take the practice of concentration. They say not only does it bring peace to the mind right here and now, but if you die, if you’ve attained any of the loves of China, that’s where you go, and you stay there. They talk in the Canon about Brahmins who think that it’s totally eternal, that once you get there, you’re never going to fall, because they don’t see anything that would cause them to fall. Yet the nature of the causal system is that it’s complex, it’s chaotic, and every causal fabrication, where it falls into neat order, contains the germs for its dissolution. So even Brahmins have moments of mindlessness, and so they fall. They can’t keep up that skillfulness all that time. There have got to be lapses. The only ones for whom this doesn’t work are the non-returners, who go to a special kind of Brahmic realm. But they get there after having touched the deathless in this lifetime. Otherwise, if they haven’t, you’ve become an ordinary Brahma. You can stay there for eons, but then there comes a point where you have to come back down again. And it’s hard to come down. Don’t think that it’s easy. There was a woman I knew in Thailand who was quite poor, and she was extremely demanding, always hoping that this person would provide for her or that person would provide for her. She was never really satisfied, even when people were providing for her. Jon Fung once made the comment that she was a deva in a previous lifetime. She came down and she hit the human realm with a heart attack. That thump and nothing was good enough for her. So we can’t think that we’ll just perfect our skills and hope that the skills will stay the same forever. You’ve got to look for that opening where it opens to the deathless. That’s the only thing that you’re guaranteed. So this is why we have those chants like we had just now, reflecting on the body, the one that everybody resists so much. The fact, of course, that they resist it shows that it’s a problem and that they deny that it’s a problem. Why do we say the body is filthy? Can’t we extol the body? Well, if you extol the body, where does it get you? It gets you attached. What does the body do for you? You work at it. You look after it. You do all these things for it. You feed it. When it needs to go to the bathroom, you take it out so it goes to the bathroom. You provide for all its needs. It gets sick. You have to look after it. And then it gets old. It doesn’t ask your permission. It just does it, bit by bit by bit. Disease creeps up on you. And then finally it dies, again, without asking your permission. It’s not asking, “Is this going to be a convenient time to go?” We talk about total ingratitude. You can look at it that way. Or you can look at it the way John Lee always likes to look at it. This is something that you’ve taken from the world. Not only have you taken the body, but to keep it going, you have to take the flesh of animals, you have to take food that other people have worked and worked and worked to raise. How can you think that you don’t owe them something? There are lots of ways of looking at the body that can give rise to sanghveka, which is the purpose of all this, to realize that there’s so much energy, so much effort that goes into this, and yet it repays you a little bit, but in the end it costs you an awful lot more. And whatever debts you have, you’ve got to pay back, sometimes with compound interest. Then there’s a chant reflecting on the world. The world is swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. It has nothing of its own. It has to pass on, leaving everything behind you. We put so much effort into making the world a better place. But then it’s never enough. And after that we have to chant on, “May I be happy.” We all want happiness. The question is, are we looking in the right places? Are we trying to shore up our sense of self? Are we trying to patch up the world? These things are all ready to fall apart. The purpose of this is not to get us depressed, but to make us realize that we’ve got to look at another place. The Buddha says we look right here, developing virtue, concentration, and discernment. It seems an unlikely place. We’re looking for refuge in our own actions, but he says that’s the only place you can do it. His actions seem awfully ephemeral, but he says everything else is based on action. But this is a special type of action. It’s the action that finds those points of convergence, where the whole system of causality breaks down and everything gets undefined. It means we have to look in special places. Then look in a special way. But the reward is great. After all, otherwise we’re just constantly expending effort that never ends, never reaches fulfillment, never reaches a place where you can say, “Enough.” It’s like one long crap game, one long card game, where you win, but then you immediately have to play the next game, and then the next game, and then you lose, and then you win, and then you lose. You can’t just say, “I’ll take my winnings and go home and live happily ever after.” You’re chained to the table, and it’s a fiendish card dealer. His only way is to get out. This is the way out. Whatever effort you put into it, the Buddha says, it’s always well spent. Remember that story he gives. He says, “You can make a deal that you’d be stuck with a hundred spears every morning, every noon, and every night, every day for a hundred years. But at the end of that time, you’d be guaranteed awakening.” He said, “It’d be a deal worth making. And when you finally reach the end of the hundred years and got your awakening, you wouldn’t concede, considering that your path had been one of pain.” Otherwise, think of all the pains of constantly running around, running around, running around, hoping for satisfaction here and not finding it, hoping for satisfaction over there and not finding it. This, he says, is the one place where you will find satisfaction. It’s radically different from any other kind of satisfaction you’ve ever had before. So it’s useful to think on the drawbacks of the world so that your mind will incline itself to looking for something better. We have the advantage, of course, that there are people who’ve gone before us. The Buddha, when he set out on his own quest, didn’t have that guarantee. It took a special kind of determination, a special kind of vision, to insist that this has got to be the only thing that’s worth living for. And even though everybody else says it’s impossible, I’ve got to find if it really is impossible. Of course, for each of us, we start out with a doubt. Does this story really reflect what actually happened? Did the Buddha really find awakening? No matter how much we may be confused, convinced of that truth, for us it’s still a question mark. And so when you reach that, you realize, “Oh, what the Buddha taught was true. There really is a Daedalus.” And you really can find it through your own efforts, purifying your thoughts, your words, and your deeds. So it’s useful to reflect on the imperfections of the world so you don’t get stuck there. Even the goodness you do in the world has its drawbacks. You help people and all of a sudden you get entangled with them. You help them once and they want you to help them again, and sometimes the second time around, the third time around, it gets heavier and heavier. It’s the nature of the world. It keeps sucking us in. This doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t be kind, but we should just realize, “Okay, it’s imperfect. There are obligations we have in life.” The fact that you’ve got a body means you’ve got to look after it. You’re going to have to face the fact that you’re going to get ill. How are you going to react to your illnesses in such a way that you don’t burden yourself and don’t burden others? Sometimes the illnesses force you to think about all the people who suddenly find themselves paralyzed, unable to help themselves, this way or that. They didn’t want that. Yet all of a sudden they become a burden to others. And the question is, “Okay, what kind of attitudes can they develop to be as unburdensome as possible?” When John Lee once said, “The truth of the world isn’t good, and the goodness of the world isn’t true.” In other words, it’s not good all the way through. So reflect on that as much as you need to in order to keep your sights set on finding the Deathless. So you finally do reach the point where no more effort is required and where the goodness really is true and the truth is good.

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