Resisting the Dhamma

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Put all your other cares aside and just focus on one thing, the breath. Know when it’s coming in. Know when it’s going out. Try to know it continuously. What this means is setting up an intention, making a determination that you’re going to stay with the breath for the hour. Do your best to maintain that determination. By making the breath interesting, by making it comfortable, you can explore the breathing. That makes it a lot easier to stay with it continuously than if you simply try to force yourself to stick with it no matter what. In other words, the distractions in the mind have their tricks, so you should have your tricks as well. If you make the breath more comfortable, it’s easier to stay there. If you tell yourself you’re going to be exploring the breath energy in the body, to see how it relates to the different sensations in the body, to see how it relates to different states in the mind, that changes the whole process from simply being one of strapping the mind down to the breath. It turns it into an opportunity to look, to explore. That way, the fact that you have to give up other preoccupations, other ideas, no matter how fantastic they may be, will seem less onerous, less of a deprivation. No matter how much you like those other things, you’ve got to put them aside for the time being. It’s important that you learn how to look at your likes and dislikes with a certain amount of skepticism, because otherwise they control everything, all your attitudes, all your ideas. You’ve got to go in line with what you like. As the Buddha once said in that famous passage where he says, “Don’t go by reports, don’t go by scriptures, don’t go by respect out of your teacher.” But he also says, “Don’t go by your likes and dislikes.” Because he himself had learned that lesson. There’s a passage where he talks about how, when he was young and just getting started on the path, he decided he wanted to look for true happiness. He began to realize he was going to have to give up a lot of things in order to find that happiness. He said his mind didn’t jump up at that prospect. But when he saw the way things actually were, he bit the bullet and learned how to give up first his sensual desires, then his attachment to the different levels of concentration as they appeared, as he developed them. And in each case, he said, his mind didn’t leap up at the idea of abandoning what he had developed. But then when he saw that it was necessary, he was willing to do so. So when you come up against different things in the Buddhist teachings that you don’t like, different parts of the practice that you don’t like, remind yourself that the Buddha didn’t like them either. But when he saw that they were necessary, that’s when he practiced them. After he gained awakening, he kept his teachings down to the absolute, bare minimum, what was necessary to teach people, for the sake of their own practice, to put an end to suffering. We look at the Canon, and it seems an awful lot. But you have to remember, he was dealing with an awful lot of different kinds of people. But in all cases, it was just that issue, what is absolutely necessary for the practice. You know the famous passage where he picks up that handful of leaves. There are a lot of other things he learned in the course of his awakening. But what he brought out to teach was only the part that was necessary to show other people the way to put an end to suffering, so they could gain awakening too and see what they might learn in addition to what was in the handful of leaves. So the teachings are not a matter of opinion. They’re a matter of what someone who’s gained awakening found was necessary. So as we approach the teachings, we’re bound to run into things that we don’t like. On the one hand, it would seem like really great news. Someone has found a way to put an end to suffering, a way that has worked for more than 2,600 years. And you don’t have to reinvent the Dharma wheel. All you have to do is put the teachings into practice. Use them as tools to explore your own mind, to find where you can put an end to suffering as well. But people resist. The major resistance is the fact that there is a path of practice, there are things you’ve got to do in order to find true happiness. We like to think that happiness is something you can simply relax into. We think the way of the world is a way of having goals and having responsibilities, but the way of the Dharma should be one of simply relaxing into a large, amorphous void where everything is very easy. And if it were possible, the Buddha would have taught it. He wasn’t the sort of person who would like to torture other people or suffer. He set up a lot of unnecessary hurdles. But the truth of the matter is that everything in life requires doing of some kind. Sometimes people will say, “Don’t do, just be.” Well, the Buddha discovered that just being is an activity as well. It involves intention. And there are skillful and unskillful ways of doing it. So as long as everything requires effort, then the issue doesn’t become where is the least effort or where is there no effort, but simply where is effort best directed? What kind of effort is most productive in finding true happiness that’s good for you and good for the people around you? So once we accept the idea that there is a path and it involves doing and it involves effort, then we run against the fact that there are certain things we’re not allowed to do. The Buddha doesn’t recommend that we do. Again, it’s a question of how serious, how earnest are you about being truly happy? How much happiness do you want? He doesn’t force things on anybody. He simply lays out the way things are, the way things work, as with the precepts. Again, a lot of people resist the precepts. They don’t like the idea that there are very clear-cut activities which are definitely unskillful, no matter what the situation. Everybody wants wiggle room. But again, you get wiggle room, everybody else gets wiggle room as well. Some people wiggle a lot more than others. It’s very obvious that when you look at other people’s behavior, what’s unskillful, you have to apply the same fair attitude towards your own behavior. You see other people doing things and it causes harm. Well, you realize you do those things and it’s going to cause harm as well. So once you’ve accepted that, then you find it’s not just things you do and things you say, but it’s also things you think. What’s going on in your mind? Doesn’t it get the mind to settle down and try to do some concentration? Again, there are lots in the mind that rebel. So you have to deal with it in different ways. Make the meditation object attractive. Other times, you’ve really got to look into what the distractions are, see where their appeal is, and then look at that appeal in such a way that you see its drawbacks. This is an important activity, both in getting the mind to settle down—just the amount of discernment that’s needed simply to get the mind concentrated—and then the amount of discernment that’s needed to go deeper, to leap to liberation. In other words, you’ve got to learn how to look at a lot of things you really believe that you really hold on to and see the drawbacks of holding on. Even good things, eventually, you have to let go of. This means learning how to let go of a lot of opinions that you’ve held on to for a long, long time. Again, we all resist. But again, keep remembering that the Buddha didn’t teach these things because he liked them. He taught them because they worked. You’ve got to ask yourself these opinions that you hold on to. Are they more important than true happiness? A lot of us want to carry our opinions into Nirvana, and you have to leave them behind. Leave them at the door. Opinions that are useful at work, useful in the family, when you come to meditate, you’ve got to learn to put them aside. And again, each time you ask, you’re confronted with things that you don’t like to let go of. Ask yourself, is this more important or is true happiness more important? And don’t listen to the voices as I went above, as it’s demanding the impossible. This is the demand that keeps getting in the way of most people’s making real progress in the practice. We keep demanding the impossible. And that was a lot of the Buddha’s genius right there, realizing that the things that he was holding on to, the things he wanted, were impossible. He focused on wanting what was possible, finding out what was possible, exploring the realm of possibility. That’s why when he would boil down his awakening, the essence of his awakening, it was a principle of causality, a principle of how things work. Some causes work over time, other causes work immediately. And that very simple principle has a lot of implications, but it’s a principle focusing on how things work. In other words, you’ve got to learn how to manipulate this causal process if you want to get to the happiness that lies beyond it. So in our practice, we have to cast a jaundiced eye on our likes and dislikes, because a lot of them are things we like—impossible things. And we dislike a lot of things that will actually help us get along on our way. As the Buddha once said, this is a measure of your discernment. When you see something that’s going to give good results but you don’t like it, you can still find ways of getting yourself to do it. If there are things that you like to do but then you know they won’t give you good results, you can figure out ways not to do them. Sometimes it involves strength of will. Sometimes it involves looking at things very carefully until you see the drawbacks of your likes and dislikes. Sometimes it means giving yourself encouragement, giving yourself pep talks, promising yourself rewards, whatever works. That’s the kind of wisdom, that’s the kind of insight that’s important, because it’s practical insight, practical wisdom. You can see the arising and passing away of phenomena. But if you don’t learn how to apply that to how you act and how you speak and how you think, it’ll just pass away and not really do much, not be worth all that much. The Buddha’s practice and teachings are practical. They’re lessons in what to do, lessons in what works. And our question is, how far do you have to go before you’re satisfied with what works? In other words, you hear a lot of people saying, “Well, such and such a practice really worked for me.” What does it mean to work? How far does it work? Is it something that’s useful only in a few select circumstances, or is it useful across the board? Exactly how much stress and suffering does it relieve? Have you checked long enough to see if it really relieves that stress and suffering for good, or does it actually bring on more problems further along the way? With an issue as important as true happiness, you’d think people would be more rigorous about this. So take your happiness seriously. That’s what the Buddha said. Not serious in the sense of being grim, but serious in the sense of being earnest, sincere, and comparing everything else you do in your life with this issue. Is this leading to true happiness or not? And if it’s not, how do I skillfully let go? Because for the Buddha, his pursuit of true happiness was something that was more important to him than life itself, was more important than his own sense of self itself, the self that’s made up of likes and dislikes and opinions and views. And it was because he was willing to question everything and test everything that was how he found the way. So try to develop that attitude in your practice as well.

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