Buddha’s Qualities, The

January 16, 2005

The chants we just had were designed to get the mind in the right mood for meditating. We chant about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha to remind ourselves of the values behind the practice. Some people have characterized Buddhism as a religion without the need for faith. Well, there is an element of faith, an element of belief, believing that the Buddha was awakened. The implication there is that he did it through his own efforts and he did it through qualities that were not peculiar to him, qualities that anybody could develop. So when we show respect to him, we’re showing respect to those qualities within our own minds as well. For us, at the moment, there are still just potentials. The three ones he focused on are being ardent, resolute, and heedful. Ardent means really giving yourself to what you’re doing. In other words, right now you’re here with the breath. You’re not holding anything back. Don’t let your memories of past meditations come in and clutter up the mind in an unnecessary way. Sometimes they do give pointers. You don’t want to totally forget them, but you want to watch out for those memories that get in the way, especially the ones that say, “I don’t like this. This isn’t the way it was the other day.” Give the mind time to settle down. Stick with it. That’s what the resolute is all about. Just keep with the practice. Adjust it for what seems right right now, right now, right now. And don’t get upset when the results don’t come right away. Sometimes good things take time. And from day to day, the mind starts out the meditation in a different state. Someday it’s ready to settle down. Other days it’s got a lot going on. You find there are other issues and you have to back off a little bit and deal with them. That’s one of the reasons why we have the chant on metta. Because many times those issues involve other people. This person said this, that person said this. How could they do that? And you get yourself all entangled in those issues and ask yourself, “Do you really want to be entangled with that kind of person, that kind of issue, that kind of thought in your mind?” So, direct some goodwill to yourself. “May I be happy. I don’t need this thought right now. May that other person be happy as well.” Then it’s a lot easier to get back to the breath. Sometimes we have other contemplations. There’s a chant on the 32 parts of the body, they call them, to remind yourself that if there’s lust in the mind, this is what you’re lusting for. And you go down the list. It’s amazing how selective lust can be. It focuses on just a few details of the body, this part, that part, and they forget the whole. And so this chant is to remind you that this is what the whole thing is. Is it really worth lusting over, especially now that you’re sitting here meditating? If you had your body taken apart and all the pieces lined up very neatly on the floor here, what would your reaction be? You come in, you see it, and you run away. And yet here you are sitting in this body. And everybody else’s body is just like that. So these are some reflections to help you get the mindset settled down. If you run into obstacles in your pursuit of the breath, you have these other tools for dealing with the obstacles. Once they’re out of the way, then you can focus on the breath 100 percent. Just be with the breathing. This is all you need to know about right now. There’s nothing else. In fact, you don’t even have to listen to the talk. Let it just be in the background as a kind of fence that you run into when your mind leaves the breath, pointing you to go back. The heedfulness here is the sense of protecting the good things you get in the meditation. Because sometimes they start out as small things, as a little bit of concentration or a little bit of mindfulness. Don’t be careless with those things. If you tend to them, they grow. They get stronger. And this is a path of developing strength. Many times we tend to forget that here in the West. A lot of the Dhamma is expressed in really nice, fuzzy ideas, soft, warm ideas. But you look at the kind of person the Buddha was, and he was a very strong person. Everybody told him, “There’s no way that you can find absolute happiness. Content yourself with what you’ve got.” And he said, “No, there’s got to be something better than this. And if I live my life without trying to find that, it’s a life wasted.” So he left all of his wealth and went out into the forest. He had to go through all the adjustments that a wealthy, well-born person would have to go through, leaving all the comforts of the palace and suddenly finding himself eating all his food out in the forest without any protection. But he didn’t let that deter him. He went to all the best teachers and found that he wasn’t satisfied with them. He pursued the path of extreme austerities. In other words, he had exhausted all the options that were there at that time. And he still didn’t let himself get discouraged. There’s got to be a way. And ultimately, he found it. So think about these things as you practice, when you find your mind straying away from the breath. Those three qualities the Buddha talked about—ardent, resolute, and heatful—really give yourself to the practice. Stick with it and learn to value whatever good things you have. Don’t toss them away. When your mindfulness and concentration get stronger and stronger, they really can provide you with a good, solid foundation inside. As your discernment gets stronger, it really can cut away all the dangers in the mind. Because that’s the other side of heatfulness, not only appreciating the good things you’ve got, but being aware that there are dangers out there. You’ve got to protect the state of your mind. This is your most important possession. And John Lee gives the image of people having to migrate. All of a sudden the word comes in, “You’ve got to pick up what you’ve got and go.” And you can pick up only what you can carry. And what can you really carry around in your life better than the qualities that you put into the mind? So ask yourself, “What kind of qualities are you putting into your mind?” If you let yourself be lazy and complacent, those are the qualities you’re building in your mind. You’re building laziness. You’re building complacency. And what good do they do you? Focus on developing the qualities that are really of use, so that no matter where you find yourself, no matter what the situation, you’ve got what you need to deal with the situation. So these three qualities work together. The more heedful you are, the more you want to be. The more ardent, the more you want to be resolute in developing what’s good and strong in the mind. So that when you’re bowing down to these qualities as they’re actualized in the Buddha, you find that they’re getting more and more actualized in your own mind, in yourself. That’s where they really do a lot of good. So keep these qualities in mind. Keep them in mind as you practice, and live them in your practice. They’re qualities. They’re not just ideas. They’re not just words. Give yourself to the breath. Stick with it. Watch out for any inclination to go wandering off and sniffing the flowers and getting distracted. Protect whatever good things you have in the mind. Make sure they stay solid and strong. That way, you take the story about the Buddha and you make it, to at least some extent, your own story. So it’s not just some mythic archetype from the past. It’s an actuality right here. That was the whole point. That’s the whole purpose in his teaching. That’s the whole purpose in your sitting here meditating.

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