Challenge, The

May 3, 2005

They say that when the Buddha gazed on the world after his awakening, he saw all beings as on fire, on fire with fires of passion, aversion, delusion, aging, illness, and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair. That’s what the world looks like to an awakened person, someone who’s found true peace, true happiness. The nature of the fire is both that it’s hot and that it consumes. It has to feed on things. And you look at the nature of life. As the Buddha once said, all beings subsist on food. And he didn’t mean just physical food. There’s an emotional food as well. And there’s suffering in both processes. This is why we have that chant on the four requisites. It’s to make us reflect on the human condition. You’re born into the world with a huge lack. You need food constantly. You need clothing, shelter, medicine, just to keep this body going. And there’s a lot of suffering in that process, both in the search for the food and suffering for other beings who have to be food or work to produce food. Clothing, shelter, and medicine. There’s the suffering in the mind. Even when you get food today, there’s the question, “Where is tomorrow’s food going to come?” You realize how precarious the whole thing is. And all for what? All the suffering, all the burning, all the feeding. What’s left to show for it? As a young prince, the Buddha had seen that life was meaningless unless there was a way to find happiness that didn’t depend on feeding, didn’t depend on consuming, was not a fire. And he staked his life on that. He left the comfort of his home, left his good name in the eyes of most people. He staked his life on this quest to see if there was a true happiness. And after six years, he came back and said, “Yes, there is.” And the teaching ever since then has been standing there as a challenge. When you look at your own life, what do you have to show for all the eating that you’ve been doing in the past, all the fires that have been burning in your mind? Do you want to keep on that path or do you want to try the Buddha’s path? That’s the choice we all have to make. It requires sacrifices. We all want to have our cake and eat it, too. We don’t want to have to wash up the dishes afterwards. But it doesn’t work that way. There are a lot of forms of happiness that get in the way of true happiness. It’s not simply a matter of choosing pleasure over pain. But there are many gradations. There are many types of pleasure. And many things that we’re really attached to, we have to learn how to give up. The unfortunate thing is that we don’t have the same certainty as someone who’s already gained awakening. Those who’ve actually gotten on the noble path see that, yes, what the Buddha said is true. And for people standing on the edge, well, part of it’s a question of who you trust. Part of it’s a question of just looking at your life. What do you want to show for your life? That’s the question that each of us has to answer for him or herself. Nobody else can answer it for us. And the extent to which we want to make those sacrifices is up to us. But the Buddha doesn’t say that you have to accept everything he says before you can practice. In fact, putting the teachings into the practice, that’s your way of proving them, testing them, at the same time that you’re testing yourself. So you give it a try. John Sawat once noticed, when he was teaching a meditation retreat, that one of the reasons everyone was so grim about their meditation was that they didn’t have any more basic experience in the Buddha’s teachings—experience with generosity, experience with virtue, or at least the particular way the Buddha taught virtue. He noted that if you had that kind of experience, you’d come to the meditation with a lot more confidence, both in the Buddha and in yourself. You tested his teachings, you tested yourself, and you found that they tested true. Even though many of the teachings are counterintuitive, you give things away, but you get happiness in return. It’s a particular type of happiness. Once you learn to appreciate it, once you learn to be sensitive, you find that it really is much more satisfying than the pleasure of holding on and consuming. The same with the precepts. A lot of times it’s difficult to hold on to them and it requires sacrifice. But as you get skilled in the precepts, you find that the return really is much more worthwhile than what you gave up. So then you come to the meditation with that experience behind you, and it’s a lot easier to give up a lot of the things that are really closest to the heart—things inside the mind, your sense of who you are, your narratives, who you are, where you’re going, all the attachments of the mind. You’d think they’d be easy to give up, but they’re not. They’re old habits. They’re the ways we justify our actions to ourselves, the way we make sense out of things. As the Buddha said, in some cases those are useful constructs and in other cases they’re not. How do you know? Well, you have to put them to the test. He gives you techniques, he gives you trainings for how to put them to the test. This is what we’re doing as we’re meditating. If you really want to see how an action results in good or bad results, you have to get the mind to be very mindful, very alert. Consistently. That’s why we have to train it in mindfulness, alertness, and the consistency that leads to good concentration. You focus on the breath because that helps us step out of our usual dialogue inside the mind. Our dialogue is to small a concept. It’s a big discussion going on in there. We run around taking on one part and then taking on another part, and that’s been the pattern of our minds for who knows how long. So you take the breath as a way of stepping back. As the Buddha himself said, he got onto the path of practice after many false starts by taking stock of the thoughts of his mind as events. Seeing what kinds of thoughts led to harm, what kinds of thinking didn’t lead to harm. This requires that you step back from your thoughts, not hum along with them or sing along with them the way we normally do. Step away a bit and look at them and see what they lead to. Look at them in terms of a process of cause and effect, and then sort them out. Any thoughts that you find lead you astray, cause you harm, you’ve got to learn how to put them in check. It has to be done skillfully because we know many times we’ve tried to squash out thoughts and they come back. It’s like the Thing in that movie. Tentacles all over the place. You cut it here and it goes running underground and springs up someplace else. We’re thinking that the more we suppress a particular kind of thought, the more power we give it. That’s because we don’t do it skillfully. There is a skill to dealing with the thoughts of the mind. It may seem like a catch-22 that you have to be able to step back from them to deal with them most skillfully, but again, it’s not an either/or issue. You take it in stages, whatever concentration you can develop. It’s not that we don’t have any concentration before we start. There is such a thing as momentary concentration. It’s the kind of concentration that allows you to listen to this talk and make sense of it. It allows you to read a book, follow a thread of an argument, follow the thread of a talk. It may not seem like much, but that’s the concentration you start out with. You’ve got to start where you are. It’s simply a question of learning to maintain that concentration longer and longer, and as you maintain it, it grows deeper. Part of it’s a matter of having good strategies, giving yourself comfortable breath to stay with, so that it’s easier to stay long periods of time. Sometimes there’s an element of will and patience that’s necessary as well. Restraint. A thought comes into the mind and it’s so easy to jump on the thought and go with it. But you restrain yourself. You say, “No.” The reason it seems like a fight is because it’s an old habit. But you remind yourself, “Let’s try something new this time. Let’s try a new path.” Staying with the breath, watching the thought go. The thought is going to go anyplace, but you stay right here. If it’s a choice between staying here and watching the thought go, focus on staying here. Let the thought dissolve. That’s the basic stance you have to take, being able to stay right here no matter what. The deeper the concentration becomes, the easier it is to withstand the thoughts. The more clearly you can see the process of how a thought lures you in, or how you lure yourself into jumping on a thought. You get more skillful at evading unskillful thoughts. Either by seeing their drawbacks or simply not following them. Learning how to relax any tension that builds up around them. The mind gets in a better and better position so it can see where the thoughts lead, particularly where they lead in terms of creating harm or not creating harm, creating stress or creating ease. It’s in the testing of the Buddhist teachings that you also learn how to test yourself. You begin to get the results of the path. That way, you build up your confidence, both in yourself and in the Dhamma. It’s a gradual path. There are certain insights that can come, but a lot of the path is just sticking with it, developing your patience. The stronger your patience, the better your concentration is going to be. The more experience you have with the path, the easier it is to stay with it, to make the sacrifices. To some extent, the energy you need on the path comes from your experience with the path. Prior to that, it comes from simply looking at your life. Seeing that life, as it’s normally led, is pretty pointless. Not only pointless, but it creates a lot of suffering. But as the Buddha said, there’s a way out, a way to have a happiness that doesn’t require feeding, doesn’t require eating, doesn’t require burning. That’s a challenge, but all of you are up for the challenge. Whether it’s true or false.

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