Self Control

May 27, 2005

When people stay in one place, they tend to accumulate a lot of things. When they move, then, they have to sort through things and then begin to realize how little they really need. Sometimes it’s difficult. You want this and you want that, but finally the choice has to come down. What do you really need? Because you can’t take everything with you. The more you try to take with you, the more you get weighed down. The same principle applies to our lives. When we forget about the fact that we’re going to get old and ill and we’re going to die, we tend to accumulate a lot of things that we claim as being ours, being us. Our sense of priorities gets dulled. Everything is ours that we can lay our hands on. Your sense of who you are tends to accumulate a lot of things too. But the time will come when you have to go. What do you take with you then? It’s hard to say. It’s a paradox. What’s to note is the contrast. Everything the Buddha said is not self, not self, not self. But then he says, “We are the owners of our actions.” Those are things that do belong to us, something we have control over. Our intentions. You can choose to do one thing or you can choose to do another. In that lies your power for good or for evil, for happiness or for misery. That’s what we take with us. This is why this should have top priority. It’s one of the reasons why we focus on the present moment in our meditation. You see your intentions clearly and you can see the states of mind that motivate them, that drive them. All you have to do is see that much, and that can make all the difference in the world. The problem is, for the most part, we’ve learned how to lie to ourselves, not only about our intentions but also to ourselves, about the motivation that lies behind them. Either we deny that we didn’t do something or we deny that there were some less-than-stellar motives behind it. And when this is the case, we’re really in trouble, because the main factor, the main power in our lives, is something that we’re blind about. And when we’re blind about it, it’s not really under our control. We’re so busy focusing on other things that we neglect the true power in our lives. So this is one of the reasons why the Buddha teaches it’s not self to look around at what really does lie under your control, because the sense of control or the idea of control is so essential to our idea of who we are. If we don’t control something, how can we really claim it as ourselves? How can we really claim it as ours? But your intentions do lie under your control. So this is where we focus. And you want to make sure that your intentions are based on skillful desires, skillful motivations—no greed, no anger, no delusion. And that requires a lot of strength, because most people live their lives in line with the Thais call it yathagam, which means in line with your past actions. You’re in past actions, pushed a particular way, and you just keep going that way. Whatever comes up in your life, you let yourself get swayed by it. Good things come up, you’re in a good mood. Bad things come up, you’re in a bad mood. The only way you can get yourself in a good mood is to try to make sure as many good things come up as possible. But no matter how good the world is, as that passage we just chanted now says, the world is swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. There’s nothing in the world that’s really our own. So no matter how good the world is, it’s not all that good. This is why the Buddha decided, when he had that choice, either to rule or to go out and become a Buddha. As a ruler, he could do whatever he wanted to in order to help the people under his realm, under his power. But he couldn’t save them from aging, illness, and death. He couldn’t prevent untoward things from happening to them, no matter how hard he tried. So rather than trying to set up good outside circumstances for them, he took the path of teaching them how to live peacefully, how to live lives of integrity in the midst of bad situations. And that was a great gift, because this is one teaching that can be used in all circumstances. It’s a skill that can be used in all circumstances. Learning how to resist the impulses that come from negative things outside. We had a visitor today, a Thai man, who was complaining about having to go back to Thailand and drive there. He said, “There are no rules at all.” His mother came along and she complained that it made her very tense to ride with him in Thailand, because he was always getting tense about the traffic. He said, “Well, how can you not get tense about the traffic? You have to come out to a quiet place like this, in order to make your mind quiet.” The purpose of the teaching is to keep your mind quiet in the midst of unquiet things, chaos, negative things. How can you do that? It’s impossible. He totally missed the message of the Buddha, which is that it is possible to maintain stillness of mind in the midst of the craziest circumstances. That’s the skill we’re working on here. That’s the Buddha’s teaching. The Buddha’s gift to us is showing us this skill, learning how to treasure our virtue, our concentration, our discernment, as our most important possessions. How to protect our intentions to make sure that they’re not simply pushed around by negative things outside. We look around at the world and it’s hardly ideal at all. We live in bad times. Even in the midst of good times, there’s still aging, illness, and death. It can’t be stopped, no matter how much we try to pretend that it’s not there. Old people get pushed off to old people’s homes. Sick people get pushed off into the hospitals, into the hospices. Dead people disappear from accident scenes as quickly as possible. We try to deny these facts, but they can’t be denied. They’re there all the time. So what we need is a skill in order to deal with aging, illness, and death. This is precisely the skill the Buddha taught. So no matter how much pain there is, no matter how much injustice there is in the world, we can maintain our equilibrium. We don’t let somebody else’s injustice make us become unjust. We don’t let somebody else’s misbehavior become an excuse for our misbehavior. We learn how to resist these things. We learn skills in resisting. In other words, what things you have to stand up for, what things you try to make yourself as streamlined as possible so that the currents of the world flow right past. For example, as a meditator, you learn how to deal with loud noises while you’re meditating. Think of the body as an enormous screen, like the screen on a window. The sound can go right through the holes. In other words, you don’t set up resistance to things like that. Just let it pass, pass, pass. There are a lot of events in the world that have to be like that. Don’t put yourself in a position where you’re affected by them. The less you lay claim to as being yours or your necessities for happiness on the external level, the less you’re likely to be attacked by events of the world. Then, on the other hand, there are things you do have to stand up for. You have to stand up for your principles. When the choice comes that you have to act, you want to make sure that you act on principles of integrity. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha expressed the precepts in such short ideas, not long roundabout discussions of principles. Simply, you don’t kill, you don’t steal, you don’t have illicit sex, you don’t lie, you don’t take intoxicants. Period. Because many times when the situation is difficult, when the winds of change reach hurricane force, you need those simple guidelines to live by, just to keep reminding yourself that no matter what, no matter what things seem like outside, you’re not going to give in to those pressures. In other words, the Buddha is teaching you to be a warrior, giving you a sense of what battles need to be fought and what battles don’t need to be fought. If you go battling everything, you’re not a very smart warrior. You have to have a sense of what battles can be won, what battles have to be won, and what battles you don’t have to bother with. The big battle is just this one, making sure that your intentions don’t get swayed by outside events in a way that would make you do something unskillful against your principles. This is one of the reasons we practice concentration, to make the mind strong. We develop discernment to figure out what our real battles are. You’re sitting here with a breath. Nothing happens at all. All of a sudden, you find your mind wandering out of control. That’s the way your mind is. How can you trust it not to go wandering way out of control when there really are negative things out there? You’ve got to work on this habit. So when the mind wanders off, you don’t follow it. You just stay right here. Thoughts may wander, but you don’t have to wander. And if you don’t wander after them, after a while, they don’t have any pulling power over you. You’ve learned how to let go. They’ll come back and they’ll pass to you, but you don’t have to get involved with them. You just stay right here with the breath. All the skills you need in order to stay right here are important ones for developing the strength of the mind. Then you use your discernment to figure out, “Exactly what do I really need in order to maintain a sense of well-being? How little can I get by with?” It’s like knowing you have to move. You’ve got to sort through your possessions to figure out which ones are essential and which ones are not. That’s why monks are taught to go out into the forest every now and then. When you go out, you don’t want to go out laden down with too many things. Just what’s essential. It gives you a good perspective on life. In the Buddhist teaching-centered ceremony, just this sort of thing. Knowing you’re going to have to leave someday, what do you really want to take with you? It comes down to what kind of actions you want to look back on in your life. You want to look back on actions that are principled, inspiring, noble. Then do act on things like that. Create those actions in your life and develop the qualities of mind in terms of virtue, concentration, and discernment that make it easier to act in those ways. The fact that he’d brought along a little pillow, he wasn’t really roughing it the way they did. The wife happened to say, “We’re not roughing it. We’re actually trying to smooth it out here in the rough.” This is what the practice is for here as well. We’re trying to smooth it so it makes it easier for us to behave in the way that we would admire. Sometimes there are tough decisions, but if you develop your skills in terms of virtue, concentration, and insight, it makes it easier and easier to make those tough decisions. One of them is to pare down your sense of what you really need for your happiness so fewer and fewer things can threaten you. Another is to develop a strength of mind that can withstand the push of thoughts and emotions that would make you do and say and think unskillful things. When you’ve developed these strengths, when you’ve learned how to pare down your belongings, then you’re ready to wander in the world without being affected by the world. You can trust that the path that you take is the path that will take you where you really want to go.

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