Hypocrisy

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Bohisattva Man came to visit and meditate at Vatamasatti. He was quite critical of the other people in the monastery, how sloppy they were. He made a big deal of how much cleaner he was than everyone else. He would come up and he would clean Ajahn Phuong’s porch, and it looked spick and span and very neat. One day, I happened to go up and clean, and as I was moving things around, I noticed there were huge piles of dust under the little rugs that we had on the porch. That’s what he did with the dust. He swept it under the rug. As time wore on, he began to notice that that was the same way this person meditated. Everything looked very good, but there was a lot of stuff that was just swept under the rug, big issues in his life that he was not dealing with at all. Finally, when the woman in the kitchen started pointing this out to him, he just leapt in a big huff. That was the last we saw of him for several years. And when he came back, he still had the same big issues. In fact, they’d grown bigger. What that points to is that, as a meditator, you want to be as transparent as possible to yourself. This is one of the reasons why we get the mind into a good state of concentration. It feels secure enough so it can look into its issues without sweeping them under the rug. There’s a sense of stability, a sense of well-being, that comes with meditation. When meditation comes from concentration, you can start looking at the issues of your life. It’s interesting to notice how much attention the Buddha gives to the little things. This is why we have the Vinaya for the monks, all the rules which, at first glance, seem really obsessive. But they point to an important issue that if the mind is really well-trained, it can be reflected in all of its activities. One way of catching it is to pay attention to all of its activities, even the little ones. Otherwise, you fall into the problem of hypocrisy. It seems to plague religious people everywhere. It seems to be the prime sin or the prime incongruity. People who speak very high principles, high pieces of wisdom, and yet you look at their lives and they’re not in line with the wisdom, not in line with their ideals. It’s a major failure. In order to avoid that failure, you want to look very carefully at what you do. This is why, when the Buddha formulated the customs of the noble ones, three out of the four focus on very everyday issues—what you wear, what you eat, where you live. Not only that, but how you approach what you wear and eat and live. Otherwise, in other words, just enough to get by, you’re content with what you get. And you don’t exalt yourself or disparage others because you’re content with what you get. If you can be really clear on how you eat and how you wear your clothing, how you relate to your shelter, that clarity goes to the rest of your practice. That transparency goes to the rest of your practice. So don’t think that these issues are minor. This is the test for whether you really are living in line with your ideals or not. And if you start out by being scrupulous about the little things, it helps further along your practice. Because the defilements in the mind are even littler when they first come. And if you don’t catch them in time, of course, they can grow into huge monsters. But you want to have the care, the clear-sightedness, the precision in watching how things happen in the mind, so you can catch them in time. Not only catch them, so you can see where they come from, why they’re coming, what you can do to starve them. That requires very precise discernment. And it can’t come in the mind that’s used to sweeping things under the rug. So as meditators, we should be careful in all areas of our lives. In terms of what we eat, not so much what we eat as more how we eat it, the attitude we have toward it. And be very honest with yourself. The same with your clothing, the same with shelter. As for the fourth of those traditions of the noble ones, the customs of the noble ones, to delight in abandoning and to delight in developing. This means that if you see anything unskillful in your behavior, you take delight in abandoning it. That’s hard. Most of the time we like to hold on to things. As for developing good qualities, that’s hard, too. It’s hard to delight in it, but it’s an attitude you want to develop. Because once you do, you begin to realize how much lighter, how much more free the mind is as it lets go of all the things that have been weighing it down. When you begin to see the results of the practice, then it turns from simply doing things because you’re supposed to be doing them but because you really do take delight in them. It’s fun to find out where you’re still holding on to things that you don’t have to hold on to, what areas still need to be developed. You begin to rise to the challenge. Again, it’s the little things, those little movements of the mind you’ve got to watch out for. So when something questionable comes up in the mind, don’t just sweep it under the rug. Look at it. Ask yourself, “What is this?” And don’t take the mind’s first excuses as the truth. Don’t question them. Because we’re so used to covering things up, we have a way of admitting and not admitting the things that are going on in the mind. Either we pretend we don’t see them, or even if we do see them, we pretend that they’re not important. That attitude doesn’t help anything at all. It becomes an inner dishonesty, an inner hypocrisy. So as you sit here and meditate, keep careful watch over anything that’s going to pull you away from the breath. Once you notice it, drop it immediately. The quicker you are, the more solid your mindfulness will be, the more solid your awareness will be, and concentration will grow stronger. Just because of these little things, those little mind states that eat away at the concentration. If you’re not careful, they eat up the whole thing. So catch them when they’re just nibbling at the edges, and wipe them out, even as they’re small. Then carry the same attitude into other parts of your life. In this way, your daily life helps the meditation, and the meditation helps your daily life. As you begin to notice the little things where you’re slovenly or careless, or you begin to discover that there really are some strong areas of greed or aversion that you haven’t been honest with yourself about. They tend to show up around issues of food, clothing, shelter. So look for them and then delight in abandoning the unskillful qualities and delight in developing the skillful ones, wherever you may find them functioning. So it becomes a habit in all areas of your life. When you really are living by the customs of the noble ones. The rewards, though, aren’t small. They’re not little tiny things. They’re enormous. But as John Lee once said, “Big things have to come from little things.” You can’t go straight to the big things. First, you’ve got to make sure the little ones are out from under the rug and swept away. As for the skillful things, even though they may start out small, work on them. Develop them so that your little good habits become big good habits. And the big good habits open up to something even bigger.

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