Reliable Action

October 29, 2005

There are five reflections that we chanted just now, good things to reflect on each time before you meditate. And as the chant says, it’s something good to reflect on every day. This first four, if you just took them on their own, would be pretty depressing. We’re subject to aging, we’re subject to illness, we’re subject to death, separation from all the things that we love. And if you stopped right there, it would be depressing. But it doesn’t stop there. It goes on to something else. We’re the owners of our actions, heir to our actions. Whatever we do, for good or for evil, to that will we fall heir. That’s where the hope lies. Through our actions, we can find peace. Through our actions, we can find happiness. The problem is, if we’re not careful, we can also, through our actions, find a lot of misery. So this pins everything on our own actions. And where do the actions come from? They come from the mind. This is why we meditate. We gain some control over the mind. We begin to trust it. We can rely on it. I said that one of the essential qualities in the practice is having conviction in the Buddha’s awakening that human beings can find true happiness through their own efforts. Here’s the Buddha’s example. When he talked about his own experience of awakening, he didn’t say it was because he had some special in with some special God. It was through developing qualities in his mind that any human being can develop in his or hers. In the beginning, you have to take that on faith. People who are suffering have to take any news about total happiness on faith. But it’s not an unsupported faith. As the Buddha said, you can find out for yourself. And in the course of finding out for yourself whether you can rely on the Buddha or not, you have to turn yourself into a reliable person. Only when you can rely on yourself will you know if anybody else is reliable. So that’s why we work on the mind. As the Buddha said in one of his other very short discourses, it’s only two sentences long, that the mind, when it’s not developed, is very quick to reverse itself. In fact, it’s so quick that he couldn’t even think of anything to compare it to. Here’s the Buddha, who is very adept at finding comparisons, analogies, similes. When he’s confronted with the quickness of the mind to totally turn itself around, he’s at a loss. There’s nothing so quick in human experience that you can compare it to. You’ll be sailing along really fine, no problems at all. All of a sudden, something seems to come out of nowhere, and you’re in another world. There may be remorse, there may be anguish, fear, whatever. And it’s so quick that even a lightning bolt wasn’t quick enough to serve as an analogy. That’s why the mind is so hard to trust and why you have to work on it. This is why we develop mindfulness. Give the mind something to think about, like the breath. And give it something to watch, like the breath. So you can use your mindfulness and your alertness together, right here, right where the mind and the body meet, at the breath coming in and the breath going out. Because when you’re with the breath, you’re in the present moment. And when you’re in the present moment, then you have an opportunity to see how the mind could change if it weren’t watched. But here you are, watching it. And the problem is, when you begin, it changes while you’re watching it, right in front of your eyes. And you miss it. You’re with the breath, and all of a sudden you’re way off someplace else. But as soon as you catch yourself, bring yourself back. And try to make the breath as comfortable and as inviting as possible so that the mind will like to stay there. And sure enough, it’s going to slip off again. Well, bring it back again. Try to get quicker and quicker at catching it. And you become more and more reliable as a witness to your own mind. You see precisely how the mind prepares itself to go. It’s not that it changes without warning. There are warning signals, if you learn to look for them. But in the beginning, it’s simple enough to make up your mind that as soon as you catch the mind wandering off, bring it back. Don’t just give in. And don’t get discouraged, because this is the way it is with everybody. And over time, you’ll find that you have a sense of when the mind is ready to go, and you can prevent it from wandering off. Get it more and more firmly embedded in the breath. Try to bring all of your powers of observation. Think of the breath as a whole body process. It’s surrounding you as it comes in, surrounding you as it goes out, permeating everything in the body. And then try to notice which parts of the body are not getting any energy flow, where there’s a sense of blockage or tension or tightness. In other words, you don’t just focus on the breath. It forces the mind to stay here. You also try to make it interesting to stay here. Once you get interested, you get more and more engrossed, more and more absorbed, and there’s less of a need to force things, because you find the present moment does have a lot to offer. As you explore and experiment with this energy flow in the body, think of it coming in and going down the spine, or coming up from the soles of your feet up the spine. Whichever feels better. Coming in and out from the front, coming in and out from the back, through every pore of the skin. That makes the present moment more interesting. And it also gets you more and more firmly embedded here. The larger your frame of awareness or the range of awareness in the present moment, the more difficult it is to go slipping off someplace else. If you fully occupy the present, you’re more likely to stay here. And as you stay here, more and more continually you begin to see intentions in the mind. That way, you can do something about them, because these are the intentions that form the basis of our actions. In fact, the Buddha at one point says, “The intention is the action.” In other words, the quality of the intention determines the result of the action. As you observe your intentions, you can get a better and better sense of which intentions are skillful and which ones are not. You’re more in control. Of course, then you deal with the issue of things that you know would be good to do, but something inside you doesn’t want to do them. Or things that you would like to do, but you know they’re going to give bad results. This is where the Buddha says you have to develop wisdom. When we think about Buddha’s wisdom, we tend to think in more abstract terms. Teachings on non-self, teachings on emptiness, dependent co-arising. They seem very abstract, but they come down to this issue. How you deal with the mind when you know something is going to give bad results and yet you want to go ahead with it anyhow. The teaching on not-self helps you to disidentify with that desire to go ahead with it. Or on the other side, there’s something you know you should do, but you don’t want to do it. You can learn how to disidentify with that not wanting to do it. This is where the teaching on not-self begins to show its worth. The same with emptiness. You get to watch your states of mind and learn to compare them as to which ones are less weighed down by disturbance, unsuffering, than others. You begin to notice that a lot of it has to do with your perception. You could sit here thinking about how you’re in the midst of this room with all these people. You could think about the narratives of who said what today, and that kind of stuff. That perception could fill the mind with disturbances. Or you could perceive this as simply physical and mental elements. That cuts through the narratives, and there’s a lot less disturbance. Then you’re looking at the mind, and you’re looking at your own states of mind, and you realize, “If I act in a particular way, it’s going to cause disturbance. Why would I want to do that? It’s because it’s me that’s being disturbed.” There’s a lot of unnecessary suffering. As you learn to appreciate states of mind that are more empty of disturbance, it gets easier and easier to act on the causes that would maintain those undisturbed states. As for dependent-core arising, again, it’s a way of depersonalizing the whole issue of what you want or what you don’t want to do. That way, you find it easier not to be pushed around by your desire to do things that you know are going to be harmful. Because you look at it and you say, “Where does this desire come from?” Well, it comes from contact, and it comes from feeling, and it comes from all kinds of impersonal things. Why do you have to identify with it? Why would you want to cling to it? Who’s this you who’s doing the clinging? It’s right here that the Buddhist teachings on wisdom or discernment really show their worth. They help you to act in more and more skillful ways. You become more reliable. You trust yourself more because you act in more trustworthy ways. And you become a better and better judge of whether the Buddha was right, that this path does lead to the end of suffering. You don’t really know for sure until you get to the end of the path. You begin to see signs along the way. There’s a really fine discourse when the Buddha says, “It’s like hunting an elephant. You want a big, bald elephant? So you go into the forest until you find big elephant footprints. But that’s not a guarantee that you’ve got the footprints of a big, bald elephant. Because, as he says, sometimes there are dwarf females with big feet. So you follow along, and then you begin to see scratch marks and tusk marks up in the trees, way high up. But again, that’s not a definite guarantee that you’ve got a big, bald elephant, because some females are very tall and they have tusks, too. It’s only when you get to the spot where there is the big, bald elephant that you actually see them with your eyes, that you know you’ve got the elephant that you want. That’s the same with the practice. It’s all the way up through, not only through developing the jhanas, but through seeing your past lives and seeing how karma affects the way people are born and pass away, and then are born again. Those are just footprints, scratch marks, tusk marks. The elephant is when you find that this practice really does lead to the end of suffering. Then you know for sure that the Buddha was awakened, because you follow the path that he taught and it leads you to the place where you’re totally relieved from suffering. This is how that principle of karma contains the seed of hope, because it can lead you to a realization, a dimension in the mind that is not touched by aging, illness, and death. That’s the proof. Fortunately, you don’t have to wait till the end of the path to gain benefits. You begin to see in yourself a sense of ease that comes from the meditation, a sense of ease that comes from practicing the precepts. And that really important sense of ease is when you learn how to rely on yourself. You can trust yourself. You put your mind to something and it sticks with it. One of the scariest things in life is if you see that you cannot trust yourself to act in your own best interest, to say nothing of the interests of other people. That’s scary. That’s a real source of insecurity. But this practice is one that makes you a more reliable person, a more trustworthy person. And in so doing, you find what’s really reliable and what’s really trustworthy in life. And that right there is something to live for, to work for. That, unlike so many other things you live for and work for in life, is not going to disappoint.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2005/051029%20Reliable%20Action.mp3>