On Human Nature

February 7, 2006

There are a lot of questions on which the Buddha remained silent, issues that were live issues back in his time, and many of them are still live issues now, that he refused to answer one way or the other. For instance, is human nature basically good or is it basically bad? He refused to answer. If there was anything innate in human beings, it was just one thing—the desire for happiness. That assumption is something that underlies all of his teachings, all of his techniques for training the mind. If we didn’t desire happiness, there wouldn’t be any purpose in being here. It’s this desire that got us born in the first place and keeps us alive. It’s also this desire that helps us make sense out of the path. Why are you sitting here with your eyes closed? Why do you want happiness? Is that desire a good thing or a bad thing? It depends on how you direct it. The whole point of the Buddhist teachings is to direct it in the right way so that you do attain a true happiness that doesn’t cause any harm to anyone else. We’ve come here because we realize that ordinary happiness based on material things isn’t enough. As the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins, we still wouldn’t have enough for our material desires. So desires for happiness that are pointed in that direction are pointed in the wrong way. We need a certain amount of material support to keep the body going—food, clothing, shelter, medicine. But when you reflect on these things, you realize you don’t need all that much. Time spent on training the mind is much better spent. So that’s what we’re doing here—training the mind in terms of mindfulness and alertness. We’re trying to understand this intention that directs our desire for happiness. That’s what we’re watching. As we sit here, we’re meditating on the breath, but the purpose of the breath is to get the mind to settle down so you can really look at this intention that’s keeping you with the breath. The best way to study intention is to intend one thing for long periods of time so you can see how the mind fights among its intentions. You’re sitting here for a little bit, and the desire for something else comes up, and you’ve got to learn how to step in. You’ve got to decide which intention you’re going to follow. For the most part, our old habits send us off in another direction, saying, “Who wants to sit here focusing on the breath when your legs hurt and the breath isn’t all that interesting?” There are lots of more interesting things to think about. That’s old habit speaking. So you’ve got to develop new habits. Just remind yourself that this is one area that you haven’t really explored yet. What is it like to stay with the breath for long periods of time? Do your best to argue with the mind, cajole the mind, anything that works to keep the mind with the breath. Explore how to make the breath comfortable. Look at the breath energy in the different parts of the body you don’t normally look at. In your shins, for example, the breath in your shoulders, the breath at the back of your skull. Shake up the mind a little bit. Loosen up its preconceived notions. If you can’t loosen up its preconceived notions, you’ll never see anything new. Learn to reflect on the breath as it is. Learn what works and what doesn’t work. This is how we begin to take that desire for happiness and point it in the right direction. We often think of the desire for happiness as something selfish and narrow. But the Buddha pointed out that we can pursue it in a way that actually develops qualities that are noble in the mind. That is, purity, compassion, discernment. As the Buddha said, the beginning of discernment is the question, “What, when I do, will be for my long-term welfare and happiness?” In other words, discernment is based on two things. One is the realization that there are short-term forms of happiness and long-term forms of happiness. The long-term ones, even if they take more effort, are the ones that are really worth it. The second realization is just that. These things are going to require effort. You have to do things in order to attain happiness. So that’s the beginning of discernment. You realize you have a limited amount of time. You have a limited amount of energy. And you want to get the best results on it. It sounds calculating, and it is. But it’s calculating in the right direction. We somehow think that the calculating mind is a bad thing. That’s because it usually calculates in the wrong direction. Its calculations are lies, self-deceiving. Here, what you want to do is take that part of the mind that calculates and say, “What’s worth it? What’s not worth it?” And train it so that it really does help, really does lead to a long-term happiness. So that’s discernment. As for purity, the Buddha said you develop purity by reflecting on your actions, your intentions. Before you do something, where do you think it’s going to lead? Before you say something, before you think seriously about something, where do you think these words, where do you think these thoughts are going to lead? If you see that they’re going to lead to affliction for yourself or for others, don’t do it. While you’re doing the action, if it turns out that you don’t think it’s going to cause any affliction, you go ahead and you do it. But while you’re doing it, if it turns out that it is causing unexpected affliction for yourself or others, you stop. If you don’t think it’s going to cause any affliction while you’re doing it, just keep on with it until you end. And then after it’s done, you have to reflect. If some results come up later that you hadn’t expected, resolve never to repeat that mistake. Go and talk it over with someone else who’s practicing. Get their perspective on it. And then, as the Buddha said, resolve on restraint in the future. In other words, be honest enough to admit your mistakes. Have that amount of integrity and compassion enough not to want to make the mistake again. You notice that the Buddha said, “Affliction for yourself or for others.” You’ve got to take other people’s feelings, other people’s happiness, into consideration. Why is that? If your happiness depends on their unhappiness, your happiness is not going to last. They’re going to do what they can. So you realize that if you want long-term happiness, you’re going to have to think about other people as well. Find a way of acting and looking for happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. That way, your quest for happiness doesn’t create enemies. It’s on solid ground. So these two qualities together, you’ve got to be honest with yourself. The purity and the compassion. Again, in the beginning it may sound calculating, but it’s learning how to use that calculating part of the mind, not denying it, not saying it’s bad. Realizing that, like the desire for happiness itself, it’s something that can be directed in the right direction. And where does it lead? It leads to meditation. It leads to trying to develop concentration and discernment. So you can begin to uproot even the roots, the potential for any kind of unskillful action through either greed or aversion or delusion. In this way, you embody the qualities appropriate to the Buddha. After all those three qualities, discernment, purity, and compassion, those are the three traditional virtues of the Buddha. This is how the desire for happiness can be directed into something noble. You benefit. The people around you benefit as well. Don’t think that this is a selfish goal. If you’re able to uproot greed, other people around you are not going to suffer from your greed. If you can uproot aversion and delusion, nobody’s going to suffer from your aversion or delusion. That right there is a huge gift. So it’s in this way that your desire for happiness can be turned into something that’s wise, pure, and compassionate. Because you’re sitting here struggling with a breath that may not seem to be anywhere but at least you’re on the road. You’re headed in the right direction. Keep that thought in mind, because it’s what gives you energy. Ajaan Sawat tells of when he first went to stay with Ajaan Mun, and he was embarrassed to admit, after a couple of years of meditation, that all he could see was how distracted his mind was. Ajaan Mun comforted him and said, “Well, it’s in the Satipatthana Sutta. Being aware of a distracted mind as a distracted mind, that’s part of right mindfulness. At least you’re aware.” Ajaan Sawat took the advice well. On the one hand, he didn’t say, “Well, gee, that’s all I need to do is be aware of my distracted mind. It’s a distracted mind. That’s it.” No, that’s not it. At least it’s heading in the right direction. He realized that Ajaan Mun was trying to give him encouragement, which people on the path all deserve. Being aware of the distracted mind as a distracted mind is a step towards finding what it’s like to have an undistracted mind. Or, as the Buddha once said, even someone who realizes that he’s foolish, that’s the beginning of wisdom right there. He’s at least wise to that extent. Most people are fools, and they go through life as fools, and yet think they’re wise and clever. Those are the ones whose quest for happiness is going to take a long, long time before they find anything of value. But seeing your distracted mind as a distracted mind, you begin to realize, “Oh, here’s a problem. The problem is not out there. It’s right here in the distraction.” That gives you something to work on. It may seem like a small step, but remember, it’s part of a long journey. It’s the largest step of taking your desire for happiness, which seems to be frustrated right now and thwarted right now. But at least you’re focusing it on the real problem. When you’re focusing on the real problem, there’s a hope for a solution. And this particular solution is what takes that desire for happiness and doesn’t fritter it away in mindless entertainments. It points it in the direction that it turns into something that’s noble, wise and discerning, kind and compassionate, noble and pure. So remember that this is a path that’s good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end. It’s good all the way through. As for yourself, remember that you’re not stuck with any particular innate nature. If you find yourself thinking petty thoughts or unwise thoughts or selfish thoughts, that’s not necessarily your nature. That’s just the habits you’ve picked up from your past ways of looking for happiness. So you’re not stuck there. On the other hand, when you’re thinking nice, kind thoughts, that’s not necessarily your nature either. So you can’t be complacent. What’s innate in you is the desire for happiness. What you want to do is make sure that desire keeps pointing in the right direction. Everything else follows from that.

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