The Humane Quality of the Path

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One of the special features of Buddhism as a teaching is that it was founded by someone who knows what it’s like to be imperfect. It wasn’t established by a god who started out being perfect. It was established by a human being, someone who’s been where we are. It knows how to get from where we are to a point where there’s no suffering, to the highest happiness. So there’s a very humane quality about the Buddha’s teachings. There’s no question about whether people are basically good or basically evil. In fact, the Buddha never talks about people being basically anything at all. If you start out having an idea that you are a certain kind of person, it imprisons you. He says, “However you identify yourself, that becomes a limitation on yourself.” So his attitude is, “Look at everything in the mind as an action.” And you’ll see there are all kinds of actions in the mind. As the John Lee once said, “When you start practicing, that’s when you really see how refined you are.” You’ll find there’s a lot more greed, anger, and delusion in your mind than you would like to think. So you have to develop a humane attitude to yourself as well, when you see the parts of your mind that you don’t like, instead of being very judgmental and being very harsh on yourself. Or trying to say that it’s okay that you’re that way. Either extreme is not the right way. You realize, okay, you’ve got habits that cause suffering, and you don’t want to continue suffering. So how do you deal with them? On the one hand, you have to develop the right attitude, realizing this is where we all come from. Everybody starts out with good habits and bad habits, or, as the Buddha prefers to say, skillful habits and unskillful ones. Talking in terms of skill makes it obvious, okay, there’s something you can develop. It’s not good by nature or bad by nature. It’s simply that your actions sometimes get the desired results, or sometimes they get the results that you desire, but it turns out that what you desired was really not good enough. But a lot of times they get the undesired results. So the practice is a matter of learning how to retrain yourself. And when you take that larger view, realizing that we all have unskillful habits, and the Buddhist teachings are designed specifically for taking unskillful people to a place of skillfulness, it loosens up a lot of the hardness of that judgmental attitude. But at the same time, it points the way out. So that’s taking the right attitude and looking at things in the right way, beginning to see. Just look at things in terms of actions and results, without putting yourself in the picture. This way you can be judicious. You can use your powers of judgment without being judgmental. When voices come up in the mind, the idea to do this, the idea to do that, look at them just as ideas, actions. Or, as we said today, lots of different committee members here in the mind. We have a tendency to identify with particular members, but we don’t have to. We have that choice. And you may want to rearrange the committee, change your allegiance. But the fact that it is a committee makes it a lot easier to do that. If you had an inherent nature, there’d be nothing you could do to change it. But with lots of different members in the committee, you can change the balance of power in the committee, train the more skillful members, and be more strategic, so they have more influence over the mind. In other words, skillful actions become more attractive, and you get better at them. That’s one way of dealing with the unskillful members in your mind. Just having this attitude, seeing things in these terms, so that when you see unskillful things happening in the mind—greed, anger, delusion coming up in ways that you don’t like—recognizing that you don’t like them doesn’t have to be a harsh self-judgment, which just ties things up in more knots than is necessary. And then the next step is to, in addition to developing the right attitude, develop the right place where you can look at these things with a more dispassionate attitude, a more objective attitude. That’s where we develop concentration. In the very beginning, you can’t take on all the issues in the mind. It’s like going into a ring with a world champion boxer. You’re going to get knocked flat, and it’s not even worth trying. What you do is you gradually build up your talents, you build up your skills, until you are in a stronger and more secure and more confident position. This is why we work with the breath, making the breath more comfortable, getting to be on good terms with the breath. When the breath gets comfortable, then think of spreading it out in all directions throughout the whole body and being aware in all directions throughout the whole body. This all-around awareness is important. On the one hand, it puts the mind in a much better position. The mind doesn’t like being hemmed in. It doesn’t like being confined, and yet we often confine it and hem it in through our greed, anger, and delusion. In other words, when you’re greedy, you have to focus only on the things that you like, the aspects of what you like about the thing you’re greedy for, and you have to forget about how long it’s going to last and all the results of the actions that you’re going to do in order to get that thing. In other words, you really narrow your range of awareness. This is why we feel cut off from ourselves. To act on a really unskillful attitude or an unskillful idea, you really have to cut off large areas of your awareness. The same with anger. You have to totally forget, “If I act on this anger, what are the results going to be?” You’ve acted on anger before. You know what happens as a result, and yet when you want to act on the anger again, you subconsciously blot those memories out. Your sense of shame, your sense of concern for the consequences of your actions, just gets thrown out. You put blinders on. As a result, large parts of your awareness is lost. Large parts of the mind get cut off from one another, and you feel confined. You feel alienated. So learning how to develop a comfortable sensation in the body and learning how to spread it throughout the body, and learning to be aware throughout the body, puts the mind in a much more comfortable position, much less confined. And then you work to develop that other issues that may come up in the mind, but for the time being, you just put them aside. Say, “I’m not ready for that one yet.” If something is really urgent and you have to deal with it, then you take what powers of concentration and discernment you do have and you use them. Otherwise, you develop your discernment and concentration by working on simply being with the breath and then maintaining your concentration. That requires discernment to maintain concentration. It’s not simply through force of will. It’s also through understanding what’s going on in the mind, understanding the ways the mind tends to hide things from itself, the way it suddenly slips off, seemingly without warning. If you learn to get to know the mind, though, you begin to realize that there are warning signals, that the mind is about to play a trick on itself. Part of it wants to go someplace, and another part will be willing to pretend that it doesn’t know what’s happening. To maintain your powers of concentration, you have to see through that. So the emphasis is on developing a sense of stillness, a sense of calm in the mind, and you’re beginning to sharpen your powers of mindfulness and alertness and discernment as you do that. Then, when you come from a more confident position, you can begin to deal with other aspects of the mind that you really don’t like about it. But you’re going to feel a lot less threatened, because you learn that you don’t have to identify with them. You can identify with a sense of stillness, a sense of calm. And when you’re in a better mood, it’s a lot easier to see your own shortcomings and laugh good-naturedly at them and say, “Oh yeah, there’s that there, too.” And when you have that attitude, then you can deal effectively with those attitudes. Those unskillful attitudes, you can see right through them. Because you’re willing to see them, you don’t feel threatened by them. The reason we hide them from ourselves is we feel threatened by them, one way or another. It’s threatening to our self-image, threatening to our ideas of what we should be or what other people expect us to be. But when you’re more confident in your powers of concentration, there is a sense of well-being, a sense that’s really strengthening. It puts you in a better position to look at these things and not get bowled over by them and not be afraid to look at them. This is how you get more in touch with what’s going on throughout the mind. Because when you’re willing to see even the things you don’t like about yourself, it can do it without feeling threatened. You come to understand them, and when you understand them, then you can really do something about them. Otherwise, you just push them away, push them away, and then they come back like the thing. It sends its tentacles underground and bursts out in all sorts of weird places. But when you can develop this comfortable center and make that your center of gravity, then you can deal with these other issues a lot more effectively. You can see them more clearly, and you’re less threatened by them. So that’s the combination of the right attitude, the right understanding about what’s going on in the mind from the beginning, and the right technique, the right strategy. Learning how to strengthen this sense of well-being inside. It’s not just concentration that strengthens us. There are other parts of the path that strengthen us as well. Learning to be generous, making a habit of being generous. That’s another way of strengthening the sense of well-being inside. Taking on the precepts, saying, “I’m going to stick to these principles in my behavior, no matter what,” and then finding the strength to really carry through with that determination. That gives a greater sense of well-being as well. So all of these are important. These are the Buddha’s very humane way of saying, “Okay, we’re starting out in some place where we don’t want to be, but here’s the way to get where we would like to be, a place where the skillful voices of the mind are much stronger, when they really get in charge. And the habits of the mind get trained to do that. They get trained to a point where they really don’t cause any suffering anymore. You see through all those unskillful habits and realize that you don’t really want to follow through with them anymore, because you see them clearly enough, from cause all the way to effect. You see the drawbacks of the unskillful ones, and you see the allure of the unskillful ones, why you wanted to do them anyhow. And you begin to realize that the drawbacks really outweigh the allure. When you can compare those two, then you can begin to let these things go. So even though when we start out meditating, we see a lot of unskillful things going on in the mind, remember, it’s normal. That’s the starting place. And the path we’re practicing is one that’s very humane about taking us from that starting place and taking us to a much better place. A place where everything really is at peace in the mind.

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