A World of Limitations

October 3, 2006

Life is full of limitations. We only have so much time here, not very much. Even what’s considered a long life, one hundred years, is really not all that much. We have only so much energy. And then we’re hemmed in by the limitations of the body. It needs food, it needs clothing, shelter, medicine. It needs time to sleep. All these things place limitations on what you can do, where you can go. There are a lot of beautiful places on this planet that you can’t go because there’s too little oxygen or there’s no food at all. So in the midst of these limitations, we’re trying to find a happiness that’s lasting, that’s worthwhile. There are two possible ways of trying to find that happiness. One is to pretend that there are no limitations. But no matter how much you pretend, you keep running into them. The other way is to be very clear about what the limitations are. Then you can find your way around them. Basically work from within the system to overthrow the system. That’s what we’re doing. And one of the limitations we have to be really clear about is that there are only so many things we can do. And there are restrictions on our actions, in which you act with a particular kind of intention and it’s going to have that kind of result. The actions do have their results. It depends on the quality of mind with which you do the action and the quality of mind you have when you receive the results. That’s the big fact of life right there. So time spent on developing the quality of the mind is time well spent, because that’s going to shape everything else. Almost everyone will agree that that’s so, but then the question arises, “Well, how about all the other things we can do with life?” This is where the limitations come in again. How much time do you have to spend? How much time do you have to spend on developing the mind? And the other pleasures that you could pursue, to what extent do they help train the mind and to what extent do they get in the way? Most of us are like people who would like to have our cake and enlightenment, too. We’d like to play at chess and win the game and not lose any of our pieces. But that’s not how you win at chess. You have to play chess. To be willing to make sacrifices, you have to realize you can’t get everything you want. Some of the things you want actually get in the way of training the mind. So it’s up to you to decide. Does this really have top priority in your life, and to what extent are you willing to sacrifice other things for training the mind? The Buddha has a teaching on making vows. There are four qualities you have to bring to any vow you make, any goal you set for yourself. The first one is discernment. Being able to discern what’s important, what goals really are worthwhile, what obstacles you’re going to have to overcome in order to get there, and what things you’re going to have to give up. In other words, really understanding the territory. You decide that something really is worth the effort that’s going to go into it. Then the next quality is truthfulness. You really stick with it, whatever is required. Training the mind requires mindfulness, it requires alertness. So we develop that in the meditation. It requires concentration and discernment. It requires other qualities as well, qualities that we tend to associate more with the heart, in terms of goodwill and compassion. It requires equanimity. It’s a long list. If you were to take down a list of all the qualities that the Buddha recommends, it would be quite long. So we have to work on many fronts. Other qualities are more associated with the will, determination, endurance. It’s a whole cluster of qualities we’ve got to develop here. And when you see that that’s so, okay, you decide whatever is required. That’s the quality of truthfulness. You really stick with your vision of what’s important in life. And then there’s relinquishment. This is where renunciation comes in, when you realize there are certain things you’re going to have to give up for the sake of your goal. Then you realize that it’s a tradeoff. For most people, the idea of renunciation is deprivation. It’s a limitation. Well, life has its limitations, and renunciation means learning to work intelligently within those limitations. Realize that you don’t have time for everything, so you want to focus your efforts on what’s important and give up for the sake of your goal. But whatever’s not, whatever’s going to get in the way. And then there’s a final quality, calm. This functions two ways. On the path, you learn how to keep your mind calm and not get upset about the things you’ve got to give up. You learn to maintain a mature perspective on what you’re doing. You realize that there are going to be dry patches, so you learn how to deal with them in good humor. One of my students, a monk in Thailand, spent years up in the forest. As he admitted, there were long months when his meditation didn’t seem to be going anywhere at all. He had given up everything. He was staying in a little tiny shack in the forest, on a very, very basic diet. Yet his meditation wasn’t going anywhere. So he found ways to entertain himself and to keep himself going simply with the thought, “Well, at least I’m developing endurance.” That’s an important quality. And when you can keep a good humor about whatever’s coming up, that’s a part of calm. So you don’t get upset about lack of progress or actual regress. You see your mind just deteriorating right in front of you. Treat it with good humor. That’s part of the ability to keep perspective on things. That’s what enables you to make it all the way to the end. And, of course, there’s the calm that comes at the end, when you’ve finally achieved your goal. We live in a world where unfinished business is pretty much the order of the day. You wake up every morning, there’s always something to do, and all the time you’re doing different tasks in the world. There’s really nothing that comes to an absolute conclusion. You give up on a task usually because something else more pressing, more important comes in. And when people stop working, it’s not because their work is done, it’s usually because they get too old or too incompetent or whatever. They have to retire. But there is something that can be done, and that’s putting an end to suffering. That’s the one task where they say, “Okay, the task is done.” This is one of the constant refrains in the texts. When someone becomes an arahant and has finally gotten rid of all their defilements, they say, “Okay, the task is done. What had to be done has been completed.” And you can imagine the suffering that comes with that. You can imagine the intense sense of calm that comes with that. It’s important, as you meditate, that you think about where all this is going. If you’re just on a little retreat for a couple days, I encourage you not to have goals, because most of our goals are set out of ignorance. A weekend retreat is much too little time. To say, “I want to hit this level, I want to attain that level of jhana, or gain this level of insight,” you tend to screw yourself up, if that’s your attitude. But when you think about meditation as a lifelong process, that’s when you really have to be clear about your goals, clear about your priorities. Because if you’re not, everything else in the world comes in and clutters up your time. I was talking this evening to one of our ex-monks. He asked me, “How’s your meditation going?” There was kind of an embarrassed silence and an embarrassed little laugh at the other end of the line. He wasn’t going anywhere at all, because he wasn’t doing it anymore. He had disrobed with the best intentions, and he was going to make sure that every day he meditated. Well, this, that, and the other thing just came in and nibbled away at his time, and then started gobbling up his time, and there was nothing left. This is what happens when you don’t have a very clear set of priorities and clear set of goals in how you’re going to get there. So these qualities of discernment and choosing your goal, choosing how you’re going to get there, truthfulness and sticking with the path, relinquishing whatever else gets in the way, and then maintaining an attitude of calm, a good-humored attitude that can deal with the ups and downs. So you can get to the ultimate calm, and that will be your goal. It’s good to be clear about these things and then look at your life to see what fits in with what’s really important to you and what doesn’t. Be willing to make the trade, because if you can’t make that trade, you’ll never get anything. This hundred years, if you’re willing to make the trade, you’ll never get anything. If it does last a hundred years, you’ll end up scattered all over the place. You’ll come to the end and say, “Gee, what was that all about?” Because it wasn’t about anything, because you didn’t make it out of anything. That’s the problem. If you make something of it, it’s up to you to make that decision and then to stick with it. You’re going to see results.

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