Honesty

June 5, 2007

This is the chance we have just now—quite a juxtaposition—talking about aging, illness, and death, the world being swept away, slave to craving, and then that wish, “May I be happy. May all living beings be happy.” Sometimes the Buddha is accused of being pessimistic. But the whole purpose of his teachings is to find true happiness. When he talks about the negative side of life, it’s simply to remind you that you can’t find true happiness in those areas. When he talks openly about suffering, about aging, illness, and death, it’s like a doctor. You go to the doctor and the doctor says, “Where does it hurt? What are your symptoms?” When he asks those questions, you don’t accuse him of being pessimistic. He’s doing his job. And he’s not afraid to talk about where it hurts, because he has a cure. It’s the same with the Buddha. He talks about suffering very openly, very explicitly, because he has a cure. It lies in that fifth contemplation, where the owners of our actions and whatever we do for good or for evil, that’s what we fall heir. It’s through our actions that you find true happiness. This is why so much of the training focuses on the mind, because your actions come out of your mind. It’s your intentions that shape what you do and determine the results of your actions. So a lot of the practice is a question of skill. How to act in such a way that avoids suffering and then finally cuts through the causes of suffering. That requires a lot of precision, a lot of dedication, all the qualities that you need in developing a skill. So when you come to the practice, say you’re going to focus on the breath, think about the various qualities that you used to develop skills in the past. You have to be mindful, and you have to be very alert. And there’s another quality the Buddha talks about, and that’s honesty. Being honest about what you’re doing, honest about the results. It’s only that way that you get really good at the skill that you’re trying to master. If you deny what you’ve done or you try to cover up the fact that you’ve made a mistake, you never learn. This is why the Buddha said that his primary requisite is to accept someone as a student. He said, “Bring me someone who’s honest, and I will teach that person the Dhamma.” It means not only being honest with other people, but honest with yourself. Years back, when I was young, my mother liked to experiment with recipes. And you know how children are. They don’t want to eat anything new. They like old stuff. So we’re always very skeptical about what she was going to put on the table. There was one time she found a recipe for some African peanut butter and chicken soup, and she set it on the table. We all sat and looked at the soup, and then we looked at her. She took the first bite, and she said, “This is awful.” So my father got some steaks out of the freezer, and we had steaks. That was why I trusted my mother, because she was honest. And as a meditator, you have to learn how to trust yourself that way. And the only way you can trust yourself is if you’re honest. So when you sit down and do the meditation, that’s not getting results. You have to ask yourself, “Okay, what am I doing wrong?” And be very careful to look at what you’re actually doing. When the instructions say to stay with the breath, are you really staying with the breath? Or are you anticipating what’s going to come around the next corner? Right anticipation is not a factor in the path. Right mindfulness, right alertness, right concentration, these are factors. So you actually do the causes. When you pay attention to the causes, you’re going to get the results. So when things aren’t going as well as you’d like them to, turn around and look at, “Well, what am I doing?” And over time you’ll begin to see the connection between your actions and your results. This is one very large area of ignorance in our minds. When the Buddha talks about ignorance, he’s not talking about being ignorant of some metaphysical principle. It’s something very simple, being ignorant of what you’re doing and when you’re causing suffering and when you’re not, when you’re causing stress and when you’re not. We tend to be very blind about our intentions and blind about our actions. It’s something very close, right here, and yet we don’t see it because we’ve learned not to see it. So you have to unlearn that habit. This is why mindfulness is coupled with alertness. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind. For example, right now you’re going to keep the breath in mind. Each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, you remind yourself to stay with the breath. You don’t go wandering off. Then you’re alert, both to what the breath is doing and to whether you’re staying with the breath or not. If you find yourself leaning into the future, i.e., anticipating, or leaning into the past, starting to get judgmental about what you just did, try to correct that. That’s the third quality, which is ardency. In other words, you really try to do it well. That’s what you focus on. That’s the theme of your concentration. As for the sense of peace and stillness that you want as a result, that comes by putting the causes together correctly and sticking with the causes for quite a while. Think of it as planting seeds. If you plant a seed and you look at it for five minutes, you water it and it’s not growing right away. That’s not an excuse to stop watering it. Some seeds take time, so you keep on watering it. If after a month or so it’s not sprouting, then you know you’ve got a bad seed. In the meantime, you withhold judgment. You stick with it, stick with it, stick with it. In other words, you have to give of yourself. This is why the Buddhist teachings often start with generosity. I don’t know how many times people come to meditation focusing on what they’re going to get out of it. One time, I translated for Jon Suwat when he was teaching at IMS. One of his comments after the third day of the retreat was, “Do you notice how grim these people are?” His analysis of why they were grim was because he said, “These people have no experience with generosity and the precepts.” They haven’t developed the confidence that comes with knowing that when you really give of yourself, things do come in response. So you put yourself into the practice. You’re honestly putting out the effort. You focus on the effort. You focus on the causes. The results are sure to come. If they’re not coming, then you reflect on what you’re doing. What might you be doing wrong? You can consult with other people. But ultimately, you have to be the judge of what’s working and what’s not. The other quality you bring—this is one that Jon Suwat would often talk about—is bringing a sense of confidence. Putting yourself, as he said, in a good mood. That’s a prerequisite for getting the mind to settle down. This means that when setbacks come, as they inevitably will, you don’t immediately chomp on yourself and berate yourself. You encourage yourself. The fact that you’ve noticed that it’s not going well, at least that’s a good sign. Because so many people go through life without admitting when things aren’t going well, when they’ve made mistakes. You have confidence in your ability to read the situation. You come up with alternative approaches. So it’s not just technique that we’re working on here. It’s qualities of mind that you bring to the technique. Honesty. Confidence. Patience. The ability to focus on the causes. And the conviction that the causes will take care of the results. In this way, you get to learn how to read your own mind. You develop your own sensitivity. This is where insight comes. This is where discernment arises. Not by memorizing what you’ve heard, but by learning to develop your own sensitivity. To causes and results. To your own actions. And the sense of ease, or the lack of ease, that comes from your own actions. In other words, you learn to take responsibility for your own happiness. The Buddhist teachings might be called the serious pursuit of happiness. Serious not in the sense of being grim, but in the sense of being really honest about what is happy and what’s not happy. What works and what doesn’t work. You would think that people would take happiness seriously, but you look at the way most people lead their lives. They simply pick up an idea from someone else and say, “Well, this looks good. Let’s follow them,” without really looking at whether that person is truly happy or not. But it’s when you’re honest about where suffering is and where the stress is, where the sense of dis-ease is in your life, that’s when you can really begin to do something about it. This is what earlier comes down to your actions. Your actions come out of your mind. So much time is spent focused on the mind. So you learn to be very clear about what your intentions are, when they’re skillful and when they’re not, learning from your mistakes. This is where the honesty comes in. The Buddha’s original basic teachings to his son, Rahula, were, “Look at your actions. Look at your intentions. If you anticipate there’s going to be stress or suffering, don’t do them. Don’t follow through with them. If you don’t anticipate stress or suffering, go ahead and try. Do what you plan to do. If, while you’re doing it, you see that the results are not coming or you’re actually causing harm, stop. If you don’t see any harm, continue. Even when you’re done, though you’re not totally done, look at the long-term results of your actions and freely admit when you’ve caused harm. If you don’t see any harm, then take joy in the fact that you’re on the path. In other words, have a very balanced attitude towards what you’ve done right and what you’ve done wrong. The Buddha said to be ashamed of your mistakes. This doesn’t mean being ashamed of yourself or berating yourself. Look at the action. Look at the result. And judge it with maturity, with honesty. That’s how you learn. This is a characteristic of all skilled meditators, always willing to learn. John Suat, when he was here, towards the last year or two of his time at Wat Mettai, up to that point, we’d been doing the chanting in Pali with Thai translations. He turned to me one day and said,”It’s about time we started doing English around here.” So he had me do the English translations. We chanted just now. So I worked them out. He listened to them and said, “Okay.” But not only that, he learned the English and memorized it. If there was something new he could learn, he was happy to learn it. That’s the attitude you want to bring to the meditation. If a mistake is pointed out to you, be happy that it’s been pointed out. If you see a mistake, be happy that you’ve seen the mistake, because that’s how you learn.

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