Easy to Instruct

July 28, 2007

There are a couple of stories related to the chant we did just now, the Kardoniyametta Sutta. It starts out, “This is what should be done by one who aims at a state of peace.” I happened to be sitting in on a course one time that was focused on translating the Sutta. I took it apart, line by line, compared different translations, and then the group came up with what they liked, their favorite translation of each line. With that first line, “This is what should be done,” someone in the group raised his hand and said, “Wait a minute, I thought Buddhism didn’t have any ‘shoulds.’” They spent the whole morning discussing that point. It’s not like the Buddha was a lawgiver in forcing people to do things. Everything in his teaching is voluntary. You can take the altar here at the front of the room as a symbol. It doesn’t have the clean aesthetic, say, of a Zen altar. It looks pretty cluttered. It’s a group effort. Nobody designed it that it was going to be this way. People saw that there were empty spaces on the tables and they brought things in. It’s an entirely voluntary and entirely group effort. We’re all here. We are voluntarily here. Nobody forced us to come. Nobody threatened us with fire and brimstone. So in that way, you might say that there are no “shoulds.” But notice the structure of that sentence. “This is what should be done by someone who wants to aim at a state of peace.” In other words, if you want peace, this is what you have to do. It’s a simple statement of cause and effect. You have to have respect for cause and effect. You can’t just dream up your own way of practice, saying, “I like this, I like that.” The spiritual life is not a smorgasbord. Some things work, other things don’t. If you want to get results, you submit to what works. You have to put your likes and dislikes aside. As someone once said, “The great way is not hard for those with no preferences.” Now, you do have the preference of wanting to get results. But if you learn to put your likes and dislikes off to one side and see what does get results, and if you find there are things you don’t like to do but they give good results, you find some way to make yourself to like them, willing to do them. If there are things you like to do but don’t give good results, you’ve got to be willing to put them aside. Again, use your wisdom to make yourself willing to put them aside. That’s the kind of “should” we have here in the practice. The second point was the line that says one should be easy to instruct. If you’ve ever been a teacher, you realize there are two qualities you look for in a student who is easy to instruct. One is that the student is respectful and obedient, and the second one is that the student is smart and knows how to think independently. Those two sets of qualities very rarely go together, and yet they’re essential for the practice. I look back on the students I’ve had who haven’t worked out for one reason or another. They tend to fall into two extremes. One is a student who wants to be told precisely what to do and not to think and not to have any responsibility, just be told, “Do X and then just do X without having to think about it. No questions asked.” And the teacher is responsible for guaranteeing results. That doesn’t work, because you have to learn how to check what you’re doing and see what’s working and see what’s not working. You have to be responsible as well. The other extreme, of course, is a person who doesn’t like to be told what to do at all and wants to be left to be totally free. Somewhere in between those two is the right attitude. One of the tricks of learning how to practice well is to find the right balance. Years back when I was first staying with the John Fuhrer, being a typical American, I had a lot of problems dealing with the hierarchy and dealing with issues of respect. I had to swing back and forth between the two extremes. I thought to myself, “Oh, okay, I’m in this hierarchy. I’ll just do what I’m told and not think.” Well, that didn’t work. The John Fuhrer would get after me for not using my head. And then when I did use my head, he got after me for not listening to what I had to say. After a while, it became obvious that I was really having problems finding the right balance. So he told me a story of his time with the John Lee. It was one time toward the end of the John Lee’s life. He was building a new monastery on the outskirts of Bangkok, Wanusokarno. The temple committee decided they wanted an ordination hall. That’s typical in Thailand, ordination halls. They tend to be on an east-west axis. The Buddha is on the west side of the ordination hall, facing east, like the one we have here. This may not be precisely east-west, but it’s pretty close. So when they laid the foundation for the ordination hall, what’s typically done in Thailand is under the spot where the Buddha image is going to be, they make a concrete box and put all kinds of auspicious things in there—passages of the Dhamma, little Buddha images, relics. Then they seal it up, kind of like a cornerstone. As the building progressed and the time came to put the Buddha image in the hall, the John Lee changed his mind. He wanted to have the Buddha image on the east side, facing west. As the John Lee told me at another occasion, that was to symbolize the fact that Buddhism was going to go west. But anyway, when the hall was done, someone realized that the spot where they put that box full of auspicious things was not under the Buddha image anymore. In fact, it was under a spot where people were going to be stepping over it, which is a real taboo in Thailand. You don’t step over sacred things. So they brought this to John Lee’s attention. So he turned to John and said, “Tomorrow, get all the monks in the monastery under the hall.” It was kind of a crawlspace. “And move the box.” John Foon thought to himself, “There’s no way we’re going to be able to move that box. It’s buried deep in the mud.” But he also knew that if he’d said, “There’s no way to do that,” John Foon would have said, “Well, if you don’t have the conviction, I’ll find someone else who does.” So the next morning, John Foon got all the able-bodied monks and novices in the monastery down in the crawlspace. They tied a rope around the box and tried all kinds of ways of moving the box. And after a full day’s effort, they hadn’t been able to make it budge an inch. That’s when John Foon went back to John Lee and said, “How about if we make a new box under where the Buddha image is now, open up the old box, remove all the sacred objects from the old box, and put them in the new box, and seal that one up?” John Lee nodded his head just a little bit to say, “Okay, fine.” At the end of the story, John Foon turned to me and said, “And that’s how you show respect for your teacher. That’s how you’re easy to instruct.” You do what you’re told, but if it doesn’t work, you come back and say, “Look, I tried it. It doesn’t work.” Then you can discuss it. That way, responsibility for your practice becomes a two-way street. Friendship with admirable people is the whole of the holy life. This practice is not anything you can do alone. As you saw today, the ordination wasn’t just one person there making up his mind he wanted to be a monk. There was a whole community to support him. This is the way it is not just in ordinations, but in every aspect of the practice. For each of us to practice, we depend on other people in one way or another. So learning to find the right balance between what you want to do and what other people suggest you should do, that’s one of the big issues in the practice. It’s going to be awkward, but try to learn from experience. Learn what the proper balance is, where every side is acting voluntarily and every side is taking responsibility. That’s how we help one another along. So we have to respect one another’s voluntary spirit. At the same time, we have to respect what we learn about cause and effect within our own practice. Learn how to develop the proper balance.

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