Resources for Endurance

August 20, 2007

Sometimes it’s shocking to read what the so-called experts have to say about the Buddhist teachings. This evening I was reading a piece by a famous professor, saying that in Buddhist teachings, intention is everything in determining whether an action is good or not. The results don’t matter. That’s not what the Buddha taught. If you look at his teachings to Rahula, a seven-year-old kid, he said, “Look at your intentions and also look at the results of your actions.” If you’ve done something, even though it was with good intentions, but you see that the results were harmful, you go back and have to look at your intention again, because maybe that intention was based on delusion. Even though it may have been a good intention, it wasn’t skillful. Skillful intentions have to be free from delusion. They have to take the results into consideration as well. This is how we learn whether our intentions are skillful or not. You look at the results of your actions. In fact, that’s the test of everything in the Buddhist teachings. You test his teachings by seeing the results they give. You test your understanding of the Buddha’s teachings. You test your understanding of his teachings by seeing when you put them into practice, what kind of results you get. If the results aren’t good, then you have to go back and check your understanding. You see this in the meditation. Our intentions are good here. Sit to get the mind quiet. Bring the mind to concentration. Gain insight. If everything depended just on the quality of the intention, that would be all you’d have to do. But the question is, does it work? Because a lot of times other things need to be brought in as well. You check the results of your actions, how you’re focusing on the breath, what happens when you focus on the breath in specific parts of the body, which parts seem to give the best results, your conception of where you are in the body, what kind of breathing is good for the body. You’ve got to check those by looking at the results. You also have to take into consideration the fact that not everything that you’re experiencing right now comes from your present intentions. Sometimes past intentions are involved as well. One of the most difficult parts of the practice is to sort out which is which. Even though we come into the practice with good intentions, to put an end to suffering, to be as harmless as possible, the Buddha never promises that the path is going to be easy, that for every good intention you have, especially if you have a long-term intention, the type of intention that he calls a determination, when you make up your mind that there’s something you really want to work toward, you’re going to have to meet up with obstacles. And it’s going to have to be a payoff. Every good thing you intend, every good thing you determine, there are going to be difficulties. He never promised an easy ride. So the trick then is how to minimize the difficulties, maximize your strength, so you can overcome the difficulties. In Thai, they have a statement that says, “If there’s no mara,” in other words, no obstacles in your path, you never develop your perfections. And the perfections include things like endurance, truthfulness. You make up your mind you’re going to do something, you stick with it. Then relinquishment. There are certain things you’ve got to give up in order to practice, in order to stick with those good intentions. So the trick then is learning how to maximize your friends. Over the weekend, there was someone who was talking about some difficulties he was having at the office. The question of bringing goodwill to a very difficult situation meant that you had to ignore your conditioning, ignore the conditions around you. But that was a misunderstanding. If you see in a larger sense that you do have other conditions, it’s not just the immediate conditions around you. You’ve got some inner resources you can draw on, and you’ve got some outer resources you can draw on as well. Our problem many times, given a situation where we seem to be surrounded by difficulties, is we tend to forget that we do have support, external support, internal support. And those conditions sometimes get ignored. If you’re to think of each present moment, there are elements coming in from the past and elements coming in from the present. The elements coming in from the present are your present intentions. Things that come in from the past are things that are happening to you, but also the qualities of mind that you’re carrying around with you, your understandings, your inner strengths. They’re potentially there as well. The question is, which of these past influences are you going to nurture? You might think of yourself as having a big seed bank. The question is, which of the seeds are you going to bring light to? Which of the seeds are you going to water? Emphasize those. Endurance, or patience, the word kanti in Pali, doesn’t mean that you just simply sit through and weather things and grit your teeth and try to hold out as best you can. It means realizing that you also have positive things you can draw on. The situation has both good and bad, and you’ve got to look for the good. You’ve got to nurture the good. Sometimes you look around you outside and there doesn’t seem to be much good out there. Well, you’ve got some good inside. This is why we practice. It’s to develop those inner qualities, the strength and the fortitude and the discernment, that helps us to see what we can draw on, what are the positive potentials within any situation, so that when you have to make a trade-off, you’re not constantly focused on the difficulties. If you focus on the difficulties, it just makes it harder and harder to deal with the situation. Focus on what good potentials you have. Recently, I don’t know why it is, in the past couple months, many times people have asked me, “What’s the hardest part of the practice for me when I was over in Thailand?” And I really had to stop and think. Then I realized the fact that I had to stop and think was probably the answer. I never focused on any one particular thing as being the most difficult part. If difficulties came up, you dealt with them as they came. You did what had to be done. You tried to find what strengths you had to muster. So you weren’t focused on how difficult it was, but you were more interested in the challenge to your ingenuity. You thought, “Well, what can I draw on here to see me through the day, to see me through the situation?” So, in other words, even though there are difficulties, you don’t focus on them to the point of weighing yourself down. You look at the positive aspects, the good that’s coming from your skillful intentions. You weigh that again. You weigh the problems that come up. There’s that passage I’ve referred to many times in a novel about ancient China, the principle that if you want any happiness in life, you have to decide there’s one thing you want more than anything else, and you’re willing to sacrifice everything else for that one thing. There’s a lot of truth there. But the trick is learning how to make the sacrifices in the way of not feeling the sacrifice is like a knife being plunged into you every time you make the sacrifice. You learn how to remind yourself of the good that’s coming from the skillfulness of your intentions, the good you see actually happening and the good you anticipate. And as the Buddha said, this is a sign of wisdom. When there’s a difficult decision, but you know it’s going to lead to good results down the line, that you can focus on those good results and in such a way that you can stick with that good decision, that good intention, that determination you’ve made. This is why, for instance, when we practice here, we know that an important part of the practice is going to be learning how to comprehend suffering. But then you look at the path. It’s not all suffering. There, in right concentration, is a sense of ease, a sense of rapture. You learn how to develop these things so that you have strength to draw on, so that when suffering comes up, you’re not totally surrounded by it. You realize you’ve got at least some part of the territory. There’s a potential for rapture. There’s a potential for ease that you can draw on. And you don’t let the story or the narrative of the outside world hide that potential from you. You want to keep that potential always in mind, so that the story doesn’t overwhelm you. You’ve got your inner resources that are independent of the story, or at least another storyline that’s going on at the same time. And you work on those and you draw on those when you need them. This is why the skills of concentration are not meant to be practiced only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. You work on them now because there are fewer distractions. But you want to keep in mind that these are skills that you can apply to any difficulty. It’s like practicing a musical instrument. You go off and you practice in a quiet room. You’re with nobody else around. But eventually, you’ve got to go out and play that piece in front of other people. So you want to be able to learn how to transfer the same focus that you have when you’re quiet into another situation where there are lots of people focused on you, and the emotions that come up. When you’re in the midst of a situation with a lot of other people around you, you’ve got to learn how to not nurture the difficult emotions or the emotions that are going to get in the way of a skillful reaction, and nurture the skillful ones instead. Remind yourself you’ve got both inside. Sometimes an emotion comes flaring up and you think that’s your real feeling at that particular time. Well, it’s one of the potential feelings, and it’s one that’s happened to get the water and the sunlight, if you think of it as a seed. You’ve got to decide, is this a good emotion to go with, or is it going to get in the way? And you try to look for the alternatives as well. Nurture those instead. So there are many potentials within the mind at any one given time, many potential conditions. This is one of the central insights that the Buddha has about cause and effect. Causality is that our experience of the present moment is shaped, not only by past intentions, but by current intentions. One of your current intentions is, which past potentials are you going to focus on? Which habits of yours are you going to focus on? Which parts of the many narratives going on in your mind? Which narrative are you going to focus on? Just remind yourself you have lots of choices. Another question that came up over the weekend was, “In this tradition, what’s the role of a teacher?” One of those roles is to remind you that you’ve got more potentials than you might have thought, more possibilities in any one situation than you might have thought. If you want to internalize a teacher, that’s one message that you can carry around with you. There are more potentials here in any given situation than you might be seeing, so look for them. You’ve got the way you’re breathing, which is something we tend to overlook in difficult situations, but it’s probably one of the most important things you can carry into a difficult situation, learning how to breathe with a sense of ease. Imagine the world is bursting into flame around you. You’ve got something cool inside. There’s the way you can frame the situation, the labels you’re putting on things. There’s lots of freedom of choice here. The situation is not a given. You can help shape it. The more you keep in mind the fact that there are lots of potentials that you can draw on, the easier it’s going to be to find the skillful response to put up with the difficulty and not feel overwhelmed by it. Even when the situation is bad, you can make the best of it. The determinations you’ve made, that you realize are for long-term welfare and happiness, are for yourself and the people around you. You can maintain those determinations. Even though there may be sacrifices that have to be made, you see that the sacrifice is well worth the effort. The results that come out are going to be good and lasting. So the challenge of the practice is learning how to bring up the skillful response, no matter how difficult the situation is. The possibility that the response will be skillful is when you realize there’s a lot more that you’ve got going for you than you may have thought. Always keep that in mind.

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