The Garden of Enlightenment

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The Buddha gained his awakening in the wilderness. He taught his first sermon in the wilderness. Then he passed away in the forest. And yet he said that one of the prerequisites for the practice is living in a civilized country. In other words, a country with enough wealth to allow people to practice, and with the right attitudes, the right views, seeing that a life devoted to the development of the mind is a good thing, something worthy of support. That’s what a civilized country is. So we’re talking about the wilderness where the Buddha was awakened, the wilderness on the edges of a civilized country, or the civilized country was on the edges of the wilderness. Back in those days, civilization was more like islands in this vast sea of wilderness, whereas nowadays it’s the other way around. We have little islands of wilderness left in this vast sea of humanity. But the need for a civilized country points to the fact that the practice of the Dhamma depends on very special conditions, which don’t happen all the time. They’re natural conditions, but they have to be nurtured, like the orchard here. The trees are natural, the soil is natural, the water is natural, but the way they’ve been put together is not quite natural. Without the irrigation, without all the work that goes into looking after the trees, they’d probably all die. And we wouldn’t get the fruit, we wouldn’t get the avocados, we wouldn’t get the persimmons. And it’s the same with the practice. You have to nurture the qualities of mind that lead to awakening. They’re natural things in the mind, but left to their own devices, they will arise and pass away and die in a pretty random way, good qualities followed by bad qualities, followed by good qualities, back and forth like this. So if things have just left to their ordinary nature, we’ll never get to awakening. So we have to nurture the mind, treat the mind as a garden. In other words, there are some plants that you want to nurture, other plants are weeds, you want to remove them. You have to know when to water, when not to water. It takes a lot of very careful tending. And at the same time, you realize that your opportunity to make a garden depends on a lot of factors that are outside of your control, which means that you do your best when you’ve got the opportunity. What this comes down to is the need for heedfulness. When you’ve got the opportunity to practice, you go for it. And when things are going well, you don’t get heedless. You don’t say, “Well, I could do this any old time.” You can’t be complacent. If you start getting complacent, you start forgetting that you have to tend to the qualities of the mind, and your garden starts getting overgrown with weeds. The fruits that you wanted from the garden, the fruits that you wanted from your orchard, just don’t come. So even though the processes we’re working with here are natural, we can’t let down our guard. As the Buddha said, when you practice the precepts, it’s natural that you’re going to be able to enjoy freedom from remorse. You look back on your actions, you don’t see anything to criticize yourself over. And it’s natural that when there’s freedom from remorse, there’s joy and pleasure. When there’s joy and pleasure, it’s natural there’s going to be concentration. So on down the line, from concentration to discernment, from discernment to release, these processes are natural. But they don’t just happen on their own. You’re taking a natural process and you’re training it in a particular direction, starting with the precepts. This is an important container for the practice. And at the same time, it develops important qualities that you need—mindfulness and alertness, and a sense of heedfulness, because it’s so easy to slip. As you develop the mindfulness and alertness in the practice of virtue, it helps with the practice of concentration. And again, so on down the line, it’s something you’ve got to nurture, you’ve got to train yourself in. It was the Buddha’s great insight that by using the processes of causality, you can cause and effect in what you do, and the pleasure and pain that results from what you do, you can nurture them in the direction to a happiness that lies beyond causality. There were thinkers in his time who said it was impossible. If you do anything at all, it’s going to get in the way of freedom from doing. But the Buddha’s insight was that there is a type of karma that leads to the end of karma. There’s a type of action that leads to a point that lies beyond action. But it’s a very precise directing of the causal process. So keep this in mind. You can never let down your guard. And when you find that you do have the opportunity to practice, go for it. Because this opportunity doesn’t happen all the time. The Buddha himself said, “The teachings are going to disappear someday.” And we look at the history of Buddhism. There have been periods when the practice has flourished, alternating with periods when it seems to dry up entirely. And then there are some brave, courageous individuals who revive it. And it takes a lot of work for them to revive it. So we’re living in a period where the Dhamma is alive. It’s got the example of living Buddha’s masters. So take advantage of it. These causes and conditions don’t always come together, and they can be wiped out very easily. So even though we are working with natural things in the mind, there is a quality of goodness in the mind. There’s also a quality of not-goodness. So we can’t be complacent. It’s not just letting the mind go along with its own ordinary flow. Because what’s the ordinary flow of the mind? Well, it goes up and down, in and out, gets complacent, and then back to square one. The same goes with the nature of the body. It’s left to its own devices. The body just grows old, gets ill, dies. If you want to get extended use out of it, you’ve got to exercise. You’ve got to be very careful about what you eat, how you exercise the body. Keep it strong so you can avoid, as much as possible, getting into the American medical system. So even though it’s inevitable that someday it’s going to die, you try to get the best use out of it while you can. It requires that you be very careful in how you adjust causes and conditions that are in your control. You run up against the day when things get out of your control, but while they are in your control, try to make sure that you make the best of the window of opportunity that you’ve got. So you can develop this garden of enlightenment in your heart. It’s an orchard that hopefully will someday produce the fruits of awakening. It depends on you being very careful and heedful in tending to these causes and conditions and never letting down your guard.

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