Becoming Trustworthy

March 7, 2008

The Buddha’s last words were to become consummate through heedfulness. The word for heedfulness, appamatta, can also mean wariness, vigilance. You have to keep your guard up. You have to be careful, question things. You can’t trust things too easily. The Buddha gave this advice, not just to people in general, but also to awakened ones. He didn’t have to give it to the arahants. But the Sutta says that all the monks who were there as he was passing away were awakened to some extent—stream-enterers, once-returners, now-returners. So he was even telling stream-enters, “Be heedful. Be wary.” This point is important to keep in mind. So often we hear the teaching that you have to learn how to trust your innate nature, trust your innate goodness, your innate compassion. When the mind settles down and has a nice sense of spaciousness, you can trust whatever wisdom arises. Well, certainly not the Buddhist teaching. There are lots of stories in the canon of people who gain a spacious sense of awareness, insights arise, and the insights are wrong and lead them astray. But as one sutta points out, how many of the wrong views that pull people off the path don’t come simply from thinking or reading, but they also come from meditating, getting a sense of getting a state of good, strong concentration, and then gaining false insights out of it. So there’s a lot to be wary of. The mind, after all, is capable of all kinds of things. As the Buddha once said, “Think of all the kinds of animals there are in the world.” He said, “The mind is more variegated than that. It’s capable of anything.” That’s why you have to be careful. But it’s also why it’s possible to gain awakening, because the mind is capable of developing the path to awakening. And you learn how to make yourself trustworthy by being hateful, by being wary. Toward the end of his life, the Buddha also told the monks to make themselves an island. You do that through developing the establishings of mindfulness, the four frames of reference. And those are developed by being mindful, alert, and ardent. The alertness there is important. You watch what you’re doing, and you watch where it comes from, and you watch what it leads to. You always keep watching. That’s what makes you trustworthy. You learn how to watch. You learn how to question. You don’t jump to conclusions. So by being hateful, by being mindful, you gradually learn how to become more trustworthy in your judgments. So we get the mind to be still so it can watch. And then we give it a series of questions to ask. Is there any suffering here? If there is, can you see what’s causing it? Look for its arising and its passing away. See what else arises and passes away along with it. Keep those questions in mind, because even amazingly radiant states of mind are still conditioned. And you have to look very, very carefully to see how they are conditioned. It’s such a common idea. You hear it often in the teachings of the forest masters that there is something called a primal mind, or there’s the knower. You try to get to that sense of simple knowing in the meditation, which is true. And then they go on to equate that with the unconditioned, which is not true. The knower is a construct. It’s a useful construct. You need to develop that sense of simple awareness as something separate from its objects. But then you have to look at that as well. Gaining that sense of awareness separate from its objects gives you a resting place along the path. As things arise and pass away in your life, it’s good to be able to step back and not be so invested in them going the way you want them to. But even that place where you step back has its inconstancy, its stress, and ultimately its not-self. You learn to rely on it to some extent, but you have to keep in mind that this is not your true resting spot. It’s not the haven of the unconditioned. You can rest here for a while, but you can’t stay forever. You can’t fully trust it. So the course of the path is that you gain these relative resting spots, and you learn how to make use of them, because you do need them to rest, gain refreshment, gain a sense of nourishment and strength. But you can’t put your full one hundred percent reliance on them. You learn to lean on them so that you don’t have to lean on things that are more fleeting. But there will come a point where you have to learn to question them as well. So remember that the Buddha never talks about our innate nature as either being good or bad, trustworthy or not trustworthy. He says the mind is capable of anything, which is why you have to be heedful. Simply because the mind is still doesn’t mean what you see is necessarily true. It may be the most still state of mind you’ve ever had, but that doesn’t mean it’s absolute stillness. The sermon that arises from it is absolutely reliable. You use it while you’ve got it, while it’s the best thing you’ve got around to use. But as you get more and more familiar with it, you’ve got to learn how to question it too. This is how you make yourself trustworthy, through the fabrication of the path. Because what the path does is it puts you in a better position to see things. It develops your sensitivity so that you’re not only in a good position to see things, but your powers of observation are more precise, more finely tuned. But it’s a gradual process. It’s not that you see things and simply go from being totally insensitive to totally sensitive or totally ignorant to being totally aware. It’s a stage-by-stage process. It’s only when you’ve gotten to the end of the path that you’ve found something that’s truly trustworthy. And that’s because you’ve made yourself more and more and more trustworthy all along. So this is how you do it. You’ve got to be heedful. You’ve got to be wary. Don’t put your full trust in anything. Use it as it’s available. Then when you find something better, then you can let that go. And even when you’ve got something better, again, you can’t trust it 100 percent. You see what it’s good for, and then you learn how to see its limitations. This principle is important. If you assume that you are by nature trustworthy, by nature good and compassionate, it’s going to be hard to put the effort into developing the qualities you really need to be trustworthy. You can be, as the Buddha said, your own mainstay. Once this principle is clear and you hold to it, you’re much less likely to fall for your delusions, whether blatant or subtle. I mean, it’s natural that we’re going to fall for the subtle delusions until we get to the very end of the path. But if you develop this questioning mind, it’s like the elephant hunter in the forest. He sees the tracks of the elephant. They’re big. He doesn’t immediately jump to the conclusion that it’s a bull elephant, but he follows them. It’s not the sort of skepticism that gives up and says, “Well, I’m not 100 percent sure about this, so I’m just not going to try.” You look at it and see that this is a likely direction to go. These are likely signs. So you follow the likely signs. Until you finally get to the clearing where you see the bull elephant, that’s when you really know. The same with the path. You’re going to have to question the path, but that doesn’t mean you don’t follow it. You follow it. You put all the effort you can into it, because you need it to get to where you really want to go, to the place where you really can trust. So the questioning here, the doubt here, is not the doubt of someone who’s unwilling to take chances. It’s the doubt of someone who knows, “This is not the ultimate, but this is the best I can find so far. Now, there may be something better than this. In the meantime, I’ll hold on to what I’ve got, learn how to make the most of it, and be willing to look for its shortcomings.” This is another one of the dangers of believing that simply by getting to a spacious state of consciousness or awareness, you’ve finally arrived, because you don’t want to question it. If you don’t question it, you’re never going to see its shortcomings. So what’s called for is not trust, so much as a clear-eyed realization that we’re capable of anything, good or bad. But if we’re heedful, we can take advantage of that capability to find a true happiness, a happiness that we can trust, because we’ve questioned everything, including that happiness, and it stands the test. [silence]

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