The Persistent Gardener

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The qualities that grow in the mind are like plants. Like the plants here in the grove. They’re the plants we want and the plants we don’t want. And it seems like the plants we want are always ready to die, whereas the plants we don’t want just keep coming up, coming up, coming up on their own, without any encouragement from us. This is why we have to be persistent in the practice. The plants we want—mindfulness, concentration, discernment, all the good, skillful qualities in the mind—you have to be persistent. You have to keep watering them, you have to keep tending to them, because they have a tendency, otherwise, just to die out. Whereas the qualities we don’t want—greed, anger, and delusion—are like weeds, and you have to keep weeding. It’s not the case that you say, “Well, we’ve weeded the monastery once and it never has to be done again.” It’s one of those endless jobs, like painting the Golden Gate Bridge. As soon as you get to one end, you’ve got to start back on the first end again, because the other weeds have grown up. This is why persistence is such a necessary part of the practice. You find it in all the Buddhist descriptions of the path. The stick-to-it-iveness, the constancy of the practice. You have to figure out how to keep at it in such a way that it doesn’t become just a chore, that it becomes something you like to do. In fact, the Buddha says as much in the way he lists a lot of the factors when he describes the various ways of understanding the path. That’s in the four bases of success. Persistence depends on desire. You have to keep reminding yourself of why you want to stick with the practice, thinking of the good things that come when you practice and the bad things that come when you get slack. One of the things I’ve discovered about people who are really skillful in a particular area is that they have a very live sense of the dangers that come if you’re careless, if you don’t master the skills that are needed there. It’s like a surgeon who practices his technique again and again and again, because he knows that if he slips once, somebody could die or be paralyzed. So this is one way of sticking with the path, is to keep reminding yourself, “If I don’t train my mind, what do I have?” Years back, when my father was alive, we’d go to Charlottesville. We’d lived there for years in the past. We’d actually built a house there and then had to sell it a few years after we’d built it. It had been years since we’d been there. So we went there and it turned out that the people who now owned the house were not taking good care of it. The eaves were falling off at one point. It just generally looked like nobody cared about it at all. On the way back, Dad happened to come and he said, “Look back on my life. I don’t see anything to show for all the effort I put into it.” He went down into the work he had done as a farmer, how many times the government had paid him to throw away his potatoes. When he’d sold the farm and gotten work with the government, working in the Bureau of Economic Planning and Housing, how many times the very well-thought-out plans they had were just trashed by Congress. He’d gotten on the Water Resources Council and then we had a president who decided the Water Resources Council was paying too much attention to conservation. So the council was disbanded. He didn’t have anything to show for his life. That’s what he said. And this is what happens when you focus all your attention on your outside work, trying to make a change in the world one way or another. It’s so easy for events and so easy for conditions to change in such a way that there’s nothing left. The only thing you have to show for your life is the qualities you’ve built into your mind. So always keep that point in mind. When aging comes, when illness comes, when death comes, if you’ve developed mindfulness and concentration and discernment, these things will see you through. As the Buddha said, you realize that these are dangers that could come at any time in the future. So you work now, day after day after day, to develop the qualities to, as he says, “see what you hadn’t seen before, to attain what you hadn’t attained before, so that you will live at peace and ease even when old, even when sick, even when dying.” So that’s one way to spark desire for the practice of the Dhamma, to remind yourself of what happens when you don’t give your life to developing qualities of the mind. Of course, the other side is to think about the positive things that come when you do develop qualities of the mind and you do stick with it day after day. The lack of remorse that comes when you’ve really behaved in a good, upstanding, ethical manner, the sense of ease and well-being that come when you’ve developed strong powers of endurance. So that regardless of what happens here, you’ve got some good qualities of the mind to fall back on. So it’s useful to reflect every day. What do you want to show for today’s work? Because each day we work involves work of one sort or another. If it doesn’t involve work, you’re just backsliding. So what work is going to be most fruitful, most beneficial, give the longest-term benefits? You realize it’s planting and maintaining those good qualities of the mind. Think of it as that. You’ve planted a good tree. You don’t want it to die because you forgot to water it for a while. Because if you do, then you have to come back and plant it again, another plant in its place. And if you let that die after a while, if this becomes habitual, you really have nothing to show for all the trees you’ve planted. But if you plant one tree and care for it consistently, it’s going to grow, it’s going to give shade, it’s going to give fruit. It’ll be something that you can depend on. That’s one way of maintaining persistence in the practice, is to keep stoking your desire, realizing this is really a good thing to do, and realizing the dangers that come when you don’t follow the practice. It’s a quality called heedfulness, realizing that your actions really do make a difference and you want to be in a position where you make sure they’re skillful. This relates to another quality, conviction. In the Five Strengths and the Five Faculties, conviction is what underlies persistence. It’s formally defined as conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. Conviction that the Buddha really was awakened, that his Dhamma was well-taught, and the Sangha of noble disciples had practiced well. The question is, what does that have to do with you? It has everything to do with you, because the Buddha’s awakening is all about what human beings can do, what it’s possible for a human being to do through persistence, through ardency, through being resolute in the practice. As the Buddha said, these were the qualities that helped his meditation. And they weren’t specific to him. It’s not like the Buddha was the only person in the world who could develop these qualities—ardency, resolution, heedfulness. We can all develop these qualities. You’re a human being, and today is a day you have to work on those things, keep thinking in those terms, because a day will someday come when you don’t have the opportunity anymore. Because, again, what do you want to have to show for your life? You’ve got this human birth, and there is the possibility of attaining a deathless happiness when you develop the qualities of a human mind. And it would be a real shame if you let this opportunity go past and didn’t really put that possibility to the test. So this is how conviction develops persistence. You realize you’ve got the power of human action, human intention. What do you want to do with it? And things willy-nilly, whether you like it or not, you’re doing something with human intention, day in and day out, moment by moment by moment. What do you have to show for that? These are some ways of thinking that help you stick with the practice. It all sounds pretty harsh and serious, but this is serious business. But then, as the Buddha points out, there’s also the nourishment that keeps you going as you practice. It’s not heavy labor all the time. I mean, think about the work that people have to do, the things they have to get up in the morning, and whether they like it or not, they’ve got to go to work. And for a lot of people, work means just that, just labor for somebody else. And sometimes it even involves doing things you can’t really be proud of. But the kind of labor the Buddha asks of you is that, one, it’s for your own benefit, and two, it’s all good work, learning to be honest. Learning to be persistent, learning to be mindful, learning to be compassionate. These are all good things to work on. And as your concentration develops and you begin to gain a sense of ease and rapture, joy, solidity, this really nourishes you. There’s a passage in the Canon that compares the qualities of the mind on the path to different aspects of having a fortress. Mindfulness is like having a good kitchen. Conviction is the gatekeeper. Conviction is the foundation post. Discernment, they say, is the plaster covering on the walls, which means that if you had a wall where there were little cracks here and there’s a build-out of logs and things, the enemy could climb very easily. But if it’s got a plaster coating, the enemy can’t climb a plaster coating, i.e., the defilements can’t get in because your discernment makes it impossible. And then you’ve got your stores of food. It starts with grass and timber and water. That’s the first jhana. Then it works up through rice, which is the second jhana. Then you’ve got beans, which are the third jhana. And finally, the fourth jhana, you’ve got ghee and honey, butter. And it’s because you’ve got this food that you can withstand whatever enemies want to attack your fortress. So it’s not all hard work. And if you allow the meditation to capture your imagination, it makes it a lot easier, even when there are difficulties. You do what you can to figure out the problem. This is why the Buddha never taught a cut-and-dried meditation method. He would pose questions, suggest possibilities, and then leave it to you to figure out how you would actualize those possibilities. You get to exercise your ingenuity. So it’s a combination of seeing the drawbacks of not sticking with the practice and seeing the advantages, both in terms of the general ideas and also the actual reality of well-being that comes in the mind, seeing the benefits of the good sides of the practice, and keeping those things in mind. That’s what helps keep you on the path day after day, regardless of whether there’s anyone else there to encourage you. You can learn how to encourage yourself. If you see things that are getting dry, learn how to give yourself pep talks. If you see that you’re getting careless, learn to be more circumspect. Because persistence is only one of the many factors in the path. You work on the desire to develop persistence, but then you have to be very intent, pay careful attention to what you’re doing, so you see more and more precisely what the results of your actions are. That should feed back into the desire to do it better. All these qualities help one another along. So if you have trouble sticking with a path day after day after day, there’s nothing you can do but stop and take stock. Think about the path in terms of, say, the four bases of success, or the five faculties, the five strengths. Which ones are lacking? And what can you do to make up the lack? That’s why the good plants you want to grow in the mind start growing and giving you shade and giving you fruit. They crowd out the weeds. But this happens only if you stick with it day by day by day. So develop the desire to stick with it day by day, the conviction that this is really important. And you find that the persistence comes a lot more easily.

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