A Dependable Mind

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The Buddha was the master of the apt simile, finding just the right everyday occurrence, everyday skill, to illustrate issues in the mind, both the way an unskillful mind behaves and the way a skillful mind behaves. In particular, in explaining steps along the path. To make them clear, he made comparisons with different skills—the skills of a carpenter, the skills of a cook. But there was one thing he said that even he couldn’t find an apt simile for. He said, “The mind can change so quickly that there’s nothing else you can compare it to.” He would say, “Even the twinkling of an eye is slower than the changing of the mind, especially an untrained mind.” This is why we have to train it, because our lives depend on the mind. If the mind is so quick to change, so undependable, that means we’re in a really difficult position, because we can never trust that the things that we’ve built up over our lives will stay solid and sure, because the mind can switch on itself very quickly. We’ve got to learn how to make the mind dependable. This is why we work on mindfulness. This is our first guardian against the changing of the mind, the ability to keep something in mind, to hold it in mind. So at the very least, when the mind changes, we’re aware of it, because all too often it changes and we haven’t really realized why, what happened. The back of your hand suddenly becomes the front of your hand. You don’t know why it happened. That’s one of the scariest things in life, is realizing that you can’t depend on yourself. So in one way, the practice is a practice of learning how to make yourself dependable. You start with mindfulness and you try to develop power as a concentration. In other words, once you decide you’re going to get the mind to stay with something, you really stay there. And train it to withstand any other distractions. Any other hindrances that may come along. And for this to work, it requires that the mind, in a state of concentration, is there with a sense of well-being, a sense of ease. As the Buddha said, if you don’t have this ease of what’s called the form level, in other words, inhabiting the body from within. Then no matter how much you know about the drawbacks of sensual pleasures, you’re still likely to go for them, because you don’t have an alternative pleasure. You don’t have these alternative skills. So this is why it’s especially important as you meditate to try to find a way of breathing that feels good, a way of relating to the body that feels just right, so you’re not putting too much pressure on yourself. Pressure on your nerves, so that the touch of your concentration point is not so light that you go skidding off. The image they have in the texts is of a person holding a baby chick in his hand. If he holds the chick too tightly, the chick is going to die. If his hold on the chick is too strong, the chick is going to die. If his hold is too loose, the chick is going to fly away. So you’ve got to find just the right amount of pressure, whichever spot in the body you take as your main focal point. Learn how much pressure is needed to stick with it, so it’s not so much that you’re actually interfering with the blood flow or the energy flow there. Then at one point, the touch gets too light. Once you can develop a sense of ease and well-being there, then you can spread it around to different parts of the body. This is an important technique for getting the mind to be more dependable, so that it can trust itself in all the temptations in the world, in the face of all these temptations. Sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas—the mind doesn’t have a good, strong state of concentration. It’s apt to go flowing out after these things, create all kinds of narratives around them. And then you’ll suddenly find yourself living those narratives. And often it’s a waste of what they call the treasure of a human birth. It’s a kind of concept you frequently hear in Thai Buddhism. I haven’t found it anywhere in the canon yet, but they talk about the treasure of a human birth, the treasure of a divine birth, and then the treasure of nirvana. At the very least, you’ve got this treasure of a human birth. Make sure you don’t lose that. Now, concentration on its own is not enough to maintain that. As the Buddha said, you can’t really rely on yourself until stream-entry, the first taste of the deathless, the first vision of the deathless. For that, the Buddha said, it requires four qualities, or four activities. These are the things that you have to do in addition to your meditation technique. First is association with people of integrity. Make sure that you associate with people who are strong in their virtue, strong in their conviction in the Buddha’s awakening, the principle of karma, and strong in their generosity. People who are willing to share their knowledge of how they became strong in these things. On the one hand, because they’re virtuous and generous, you can trust that they’re reliable. Because they have conviction in the principle of karma, you can trust that they’re not going to turn on you. And that what wisdom they have, they’re willing to share. There’s that statement in Dogon that if you stay with a person like this, it’s walking through the fog. Without you having to do anything, without you having to go down and dip in the river, your robes get wet, he said. In other words, gradually, you pick up that person’s habits, pick up that person’s way of seeing things. That, in and of itself, is an important principle. The Maṅgala Sutta is said to be one form of protection, associating with wise people, associating with people of integrity. As we all know, the people you hang around tend to become the voices in your head, commenting on things, instructing you to do this, not to do that. You want to have good voices in your head. That’s the second activity, which is listening to people of integrity, hearing what dharma they have to teach, and learning how to recognize what dharma is. The Buddha’s instruction is to go to me, his stepmother, if you know that by adopting a certain dharma it’s going to lead to passion, it’s going to lead to making yourself burdensome, it’s going to lead to fettering. You know that that’s not the dharma. If, on the other hand, you find that adopting that particular teaching leads to being dispassionate, to being unburdensome, to being humble and unassuming, you know that that’s the dharma. That’s what you want to listen to as much as possible. But even though you listen to it, it’s not enough right there. You’ve got to apply appropriate attention. This is the third activity, what they call factors for stream-entry. In other words, you evaluate what you’ve heard. To what extent will it help lead to the end of suffering? Because that’s what appropriate attention is. It’s learning how to look at things in such a way that you can see what’s skillful, what’s not skillful, and what will lead to the end of suffering. Those are the issues in life that you should focus on. We often have so many other issues that get in the way that we often overlook this very basic way of looking at things. What, if you do it, will lead to suffering? What will not? The Buddha’s instruction and the story of the Buddha’s life is proof that just taking this one question as far as it can go will lead to a true happiness. And not just a happiness, it will lead to a harmless happiness, blameless. Because after all, as the Buddha said, that’s the beginning of wisdom, when you realize that this is the big issue in life. What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? It makes you realize that your true happiness is going to have to depend on your actions, and you want the long-term rather than the short-term fix. Compassion is another one of the Buddha’s virtues. It’s also based on the wise pursuit of happiness. There’s that story of King Vassana. There’s interchambers with Queen Mallika, and in a tender moment he turns to her and says, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” Hoping, of course, expecting, of course, that she will say, “Yes, Your Majesty, you.” But that’s not what she says. She says, “No.” Then she turns the tables on him. “How about you? Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” He has to admit that, “Well, no.” So that’s the end of whatever fantasy he had hoped for, based on that question. So he goes down and visits the Buddha. He tells the Buddha what conversation transpired between him and the Queen. And the Buddha says something interesting. He says, “You will search the wide world over, and you will not find anyone that you love more than yourself. But at the same time, each person that you will meet will love him or herself fiercely.” In other words, they’re just like you. There’s no one that they love more than themselves. The Buddha’s conclusion from that is not, “Well, just fight for whatever happiness you can get, and to hell with everybody else.” His conclusion is, “You should make sure that your happiness doesn’t depend on harming anyone else, because after all, if it does harm them, they’re going to do what they can to destroy your happiness.” So we want a happiness that’s totally harmless, that places no burden on anyone. That’s why that’s one aspect of the Dhamma, is learning how to be unburdensome. This is the beginning of compassion. Purity comes from your ability to look at your actions and see where you actually have harmed yourself or harmed anyone else. Looking before you do the action, looking at your intention, while you’re doing the action, looking at the results. And then after the action is done, looking at the long-term results. If you see that you’ve caused unexpected harm, if the action was unskillful, you resolve not to repeat it. And at the same time, you go discuss things with a person of an integrity. See what added insights that person can give you. In other words, you recognize your mistakes and you’re frank about them with the appropriate people. So what the Buddha does here, he takes the pursuit of happiness, which everybody’s pursuing, most often in unskillful ways, and he shows how you can pursue it in such a way that gives rise to honorable, noble qualities of mind—wisdom, compassion, purity. And so this is why his way of looking at things in terms of the four noble truths really is noble. This is what appropriate attention is, looking for the long-term happiness and understanding that these qualities of wisdom, compassion, and purity don’t necessarily have to be a part of that happiness. The fourth factor for stream-entry is practice of the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. This can mean two things. One is that you don’t practice in line with your likes and dislikes, because after all, where do they come from? They come from your ignorance, they come from your craving, your defilements. You can’t trust them. When you’ve listened to the true Dhamma, when you’ve contemplated with appropriate attention, then whatever is called for, you stir yourself to do what’s called for. This is another area in which wisdom gets developed. There are things that you like to do that give bad results and things you don’t like to do that give good results. One part of wisdom is actually knowing that fact. The second part is that if you see that something you like gives bad results, you learn how to talk yourself out of doing it. That’s strategic wisdom—knowing how to reason with yourself, knowing how to get the mind inclined not to do things that it likes but are going to give bad results, and to get it inclined to do things that it may not like to do but will give good results. So wisdom is not just knowing about things; it’s knowing the strategy for keeping your actions on the right course. The other meaning of practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma is to practice for the sake of disenchantment, dispassion, realizing that our sensual pleasures really don’t provide the happiness that we’d like to get out of them. As the Buddha once said, we’re actually more attached to our designs on sensual pleasures than we actually are to the pleasures themselves. His image is of a dog chewing on a bone that doesn’t have any meat. The flavor it gets out of the bone is the flavor of its own saliva. In other words, the flavor of a sensual passion, a sensual pleasure, has more to do with our ideas about it than with the actual sensation, the actual feeling itself. So you practice in whatever way you can to induce that sense of disenchantment, dispassion, seeing that those kinds of pursuits really are not worth it, and you’re much better off to pursue the Dhamma. Then you apply this principle to even subtler attachments, until the mind is finally free and you have your first taste of the Datlas. At that point, you have your guarantee that the Buddha was right. There really is a Datlas. You’ve touched it. You’ve seen it. There’s no doubt at that point. This is a huge impact on the mind. It cuts through three fetters. The fetter of identity views, in which you identify with any of the khandhas. Any feeling or perception or thought construct, you know deep down inside that they’re not really you or yours. They don’t exist in you. You don’t exist in them. They’re just aggregates that are there. You’ve overcome your uncertainty about the Buddhist teachings because you’ve seen the results, and you’re no longer attached to particular habits and practices, either bad habits or good habits. You know that the good habits are part of the path, but eventually they have to be abandoned, too. So it’s not just a matter of being a good little boy or a good little girl and you’re going to get your reward. Or abiding certain rules or patterns of behavior is, in and of itself, enough. You pursue skillful habits, skillful practices, because they yield a result that goes beyond them. Once you’ve seen the result, then you know, okay, these just are a path. They’re tools. You no longer grasp at them. You use them. You use them as tools, but then when the job is done, you put them down. At that point, you’re dependable, at least to the point of knowing that you won’t break the precepts and that your conviction in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha is verified. But even stream-enters can get heedless. In other words, they can get slack in the practice. After all, they’re guaranteed nirvana seven lifetimes. But the amount of suffering remaining for a stream-enter, the Buddha said, is like the difference between all the water in the oceans of the world. And then suppose that the sun heated up and all the oceans boiled away, and there’d be two or three drops left. Two or three drops in the amount of suffering. The amount of suffering that faces any stream-enterer after he experiences stream-entering. The water in the ocean is the amount of suffering that other people face. There’s no comparison. So you should keep these qualities in mind, these activities in mind, so you can take this very changeable mind. They can change so quickly that even the Buddha couldn’t find a simile for it. And you turn it into something dependable. In Pali, they call it niyati bhuggala, a person who’s dependable, reliable, a person who’s for sure. That’s the point where you can depend on yourself. So always try to keep your practice focused in that direction, because it’s only then that you’re safe.

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