NR The Good Fight

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One of the most useful teachings to keep in mind as you meditate is the teaching on karma. In particular, the point on karma, where the Buddha says that things aren’t totally determined by the past. As you’re sitting here, you’re experiencing the results of past karma, but you’re also experiencing your present intentions. That’s present karma, and some of the results of those present intentions. This is a good teaching to keep in mind as you’re dealing with hindrances. You’re sitting here doing battle with sensual desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, war with uncertainty, war with all five of them all at once, or any combination. Sometimes a sense of futility might come in, and it might be better to stop. This is not a good time to meditate. Things aren’t going well. But when things aren’t going well, that’s precisely the time you’ve got to stop. You’ve got to work with it and realize that even though there may be influences coming in from the past, all kinds of unskillful intentions you had in the past, still they don’t totally shape what you’ve got in the present moment. You can make up your mind to try something skillful, and sometimes that means, as the Buddha said, fabrication, in other words, you put effort into it. You’re sitting here hoping to get the mind to be calm and still and have a nice sail through the hour, and you find yourself battling the wind and the waves. You say, “It must be bad meditation,” you might think. Well, it’s not necessarily the case. Battling the wind and the waves is an important part of the meditation, learning how to battle them skillfully. In other words, if there’s an issue you’ve got to deal with, you’ve got to deal with it. If you don’t take it on and just say, “Well, I’ll come back some other time when things are nicer,” you never pick up the skills that you need to work through difficult situations. So keep that point in mind that the bad part of the meditation may be coming from past intentions. The difficult part may be coming from past intentions. The fact that you’re putting up a fight, that’s the skillful intention, because all too often our problem is that we give in to our hindrances. Sensual desire comes along and you feel, “Well, maybe that really is worth having, a desire for this thing, maybe it really is desirable.” If you’re ill-willed for somebody, you can think of all kinds of scenarios, “That person has really bad intentions for me, he treats me like this, he treats me like that, I want to see him suffer.” When you get sleepy, you say, “Well, maybe this is not a good time to meditate. I’m tired.” When you’re restless and anxious about some issue, you tell yourself, “I’ve got to think about this, I’ve got to worry about this, otherwise I wouldn’t know how to handle it.” When doubts come up, you say, “Well, this really is doubtful. I don’t trust this person, I don’t trust this path, I don’t trust anything here,” and your mind just starts seeing in line with those things. That’s taking unskillful influences from the past and just adding more unskillful intentions right now, and it just goes spiraling down. You say, “I’ve got to learn how to take them on.” Realize that these hindrances are the things that have blocked your progress all along, through how many lifetimes? If you keep on seeing things in line with them, they’ll keep on running your life. You’ll just keep piling on more and more unskillful present karma, which, with the passage of time, turns into unskillful past karma. And it doesn’t go away, it keeps coming back, coming back. So you have to learn how to keep coming back as well. If one technique doesn’t work, try another technique. Even though we use the breath as our home base here, that doesn’t mean we have to be limited to just the breath. When ill-will comes up, you have to ask yourself, “What do I gain from this person’s suffering? And how do I know that that person has ill-will for me?” Maybe I’ve just taken the defilement in my heart and thrown it on him. The image of Jhana Mahaprabhu appears as having much more blood in your own heart, and you just throw it on the other person. Scatter it around, so everybody’s muddy. You’ve got to learn how to question that. And the same with the things you desire. Are they really desirable? Take them apart when you gain them. Say it’s an object that you desire. What do you really gain? Just slips through your fingers. What happiness comes from gaining pleasurable things outside? As I would have said, the only real happiness is peace. The pleasure that comes from running after things outside, it’s hot pleasure. In other words, it comes mixed up with a lot of stress, a lot of suffering. And the contrast of the stress with that little bit of pleasure may be Ventaisan. That’s what a lot of sensory pleasure is, the contrast with that little bit of pleasure, with all the stress and effort that went into gaining it. The sense of release after the stress is gone, a little bit of pleasure comes. Then pressure builds up again. You’ve got to find something else. The mind spends all its time running around, running around, running around. Even though it may pick up a few pleasures here and there as it runs, you have to pay attention to the stress of the running. Is there any real happiness there? How about a happiness that comes when you don’t have to run? That’s the only true happiness there is. The same with sloth and torpor. There’s a tendency to want to give in. After all, you’ve been working all day, you’re tired, things aren’t going well. This doesn’t count as a good meditation session. Well, again, a good meditation session doesn’t mean you have to get the results right away. The fact that you’re putting up a fight means that you’re learning how not to give in to the hindrance. In a sense, the goodness in the meditation is in the fight, in the struggle. It may or may not be calm, and it may or may not be as pleasurable and peaceful as you’d like. Remember, we’re on a path here, and not every aspect of the path is going to resemble a goal. Think of the road that goes to the Grand Canyon, it goes through that very dreary desert between us and the Grand Canyon. This is not to mean that the whole path is going to be dreary, but there are dreary stretches, there are difficult stretches, and yet, struggling with the difficulty is part of the skill you need to develop. It’s part of the path. As the Buddha says, it’s exerting a fabrication, either working with the way you breathe or working with the way you think about the issue. All too often, people have the misconception that meditation involves no thinking at all. But the Buddha never taught that. There are methods of thinking about things that inspire the mind. There are methods of thinking about things that counteract unskillful thoughts, the hindrances as they arise. You’ve got to think things through, analyze them, understand them. In other words, analyze what’s going on in the mind as it’s happening. You’re learning how to counteract it. It comes up with one argument, and you’ve got to counter-argument it. It says to stop. You say, “Why?” So, sometimes, in the battle, the skillful qualities are the ones that develop, that you wouldn’t ever gain if you didn’t enter into the battle. As the Jamma Habura says, if you don’t enter into the ring and put up a fight, how can you even say you lost? You didn’t even get in there. It’s worse than losing. The person who gets in the ring and fights, even if he loses, he can learn something. He can learn something from his opponent. And here your opponents are the hindrances. Sometimes you have to take that attitude. So even if the meditation is not peaceful, it doesn’t mean you’re doing poorly. Sometimes you have intentions from the past that are really putting a lot of pressure on the situation in the present moment. But what you’ve got to focus on is, what is your intention now? How are you dealing with these thoughts as they come up? Are you playing along with them? Are you giving in to them? Are you learning how to resist them? If you keep that attitude, you’re going to keep on putting up the fight. If you’re determined, you’ll find that your desire to learn is the most important thing here. Even if the results aren’t coming in well today, you say, “Well, you learned something. This technique doesn’t work.” Your intention may be skillful, but it may not have been carried out in a skillful way. But at least you’ve maintained the skillful intention to put up that fight. So that’s the first thing you want to learn. Always try to maintain the skillful intention. The second thing is to always regard each meditation session as an opportunity to learn. When you come out of it, ask yourself, “What did I learn from that?” Sometimes I get people calling me with questions about their meditation. They say, “Well, they did this, this, this, and this is what happened. Was that right?” I find that it’s a good, automatic question to ask, not all the time, but sometimes, “Well, what did you learn?” Many times I say, “Well, I never thought about that, that question.” For them, it was either right or wrong. But you have to learn how to judge what’s right or wrong, what’s working, what’s not working, what you tried, what the results were, how you might fiddle with what you’ve done. You have to get the results more and more in line with what you want. So when you keep these thoughts in mind, maintain the skillful intention and always be willing to learn. When you keep remembering those points, then even though the meditation isn’t going the way you want it to, you’re still on the path. And you can take joy in that.

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