A Trustworthy Mind

January 19, 2009

In Thailand, on the king’s birthday and other important days related to the king, people will meditate and dedicate the merit of their meditation to the king. So tonight I’d like us to do the same for our new leaders. So they can rule wisely and rule with a common good in mind. So get your mind in the shape that you would like to give it, as a gift. That means that you want to get it as centered and one as possible. The closer you get the mind to be genuinely one, the more value it has. It’ll be the kind of thing that you’d actually like to give as a gift. It’s not when you have lots of different thoughts and lots of different ideas that the mind is of great value. It’s like having a fruit. If the market is full of that particular kind of fruit, it doesn’t have much value. If there was only one of that particular kind of fruit in the market, it would have a really high price. So try to make your mind one, so it has a high value. Think about the other qualities as well. Make the mind valuable, something you can trust. Think about the qualities you can trust in a friend. The Buddha says there are four qualities. They are conviction, generosity, virtue, and discernment. So try to bring them into your mind. Bring those qualities into your mind as well. Conviction in the awakening of the Buddha, which in our lifetimes, in our lives, interprets into conviction in the importance of our actions, that human action can lead to a true happiness, that your intentions really do shape what you do. You’re not acting under the force of the stars or outside fate. You do have free choice, if you take advantage of it. Many times we just let everything go on automatic pilot. But the more we look into the mind, the more we’re clear about what’s happening in the mind, the more we begin to realize that we really do have our choices. We’re making them all the time, and they are important. If you find a person who believes in that, that’s the kind of person you can trust. Much more than a person who doesn’t believe in that. A person who believes in the principle of action will have to be very careful about how he or she acts. So you want that principle in your mind as well, so you can begin to trust your mind, too. You’ve got the principle of generosity, because that’s one of the first places where you exercise your free will. It’s one of the areas, even as children, that we begin to have a sense that we have choices. In the beginning, we give things because we’re told to. Christmas comes, birthdays come, things have to be done, things have to be given. There’s a certain sense of compulsion there. But think back and see when was the time when you actually gave a gift totally out of the desire to give? You didn’t have to give it, but there was something you wanted to give this one person because you felt it might be good. That’s the point where your mind begins to have a sense that it does have choices and it can make a difference in the world. So you want to nurture that sense that the best choice is the one to take the form of generosity. You’re happy to nurture that quality in the mind. That translates into the realization that if you’re going to get anything out of the meditation, you first have to give. You have to be willing to give your energy, willing to make sacrifices, willing to push yourself more than you normally might want to. You’ve got to have the experience in the past of appreciating what a good thing it is to be able to give and that it really is an expression of your freedom. Then you’ve got good habits to build on. Next quality is virtue. Restraint, which is what virtue is all about. Restraining yourself from doing horrible things. Again, if you encounter that in another person, that person is much more likely to be a person you can trust than someone who doesn’t exercise restraint, who’s very casual about the principle of trying to restrain yourself from doing harm. The people who keep saying, “Well, it’s really hard to tell what’s right and what’s wrong. It’s all very fuzzy.” The areas where it’s fuzzy are very, very minor. The important ones are generally pretty clear, and you want to promote that clarity in your practice. Then there’s discernment, which in the sutta where the Buddha talks about these qualities, he says, is discernment into arising and passing away, seeing how things arise in the mind, seeing how they pass away, understanding how and why they arise, coupled with a sense that some things are skillful and some things are not, i.e., the things that are skillful you want to encourage, and the things that are not you want to discourage. You want to learn how to undercut them. It’s by seeing a right thing arising and passing in the mind that you begin to detect what’s actually going on. This can range on many levels. Say there’s anger in the mind, and if you see it just as a constant undercurrent, you’re really missing something important, that anger comes and it goes. Even when angry thoughts occupy your mind for long periods of time, it’s not that the anger is there all the time. You slip into it, you slip out of it. And when you begin to see that it comes and it goes, then you begin to put yourself in a position where you can actually do something about it. Same with good qualities. Mindfulness comes, mindfulness lapses. It comes back again, it lapses again. Learn to recognize when it’s there and when it’s gone, so you can do something about it. It’s in seeing these things arising and passing away that you begin to realize that, yes, you do have choices. And you really can make a difference. The good qualities in the mind can be nurtured, and the unskillful qualities are not constantly there. You don’t have to give in to them. This puts you in a position where you’re not totally under the thumb of the unskillful things, and you’re more heedful about what is skillful. So when things are going well, you don’t get complacent. When you find that the mind is not going where you want it to, you have some skill in learning how to direct it in the direction where you want it to go. In other words, it’s not just wishing that it’s going to be good. That’s going to make it good. When things aren’t going well, it’s just wishing for it to go away. You actually see how things come, how they go, and that puts you in a position where you can influence their coming and their going. All four of these qualities are based on the principle that you are free, or you can be free. You’re free to make skillful choices in how you act outside, how you speak, and free to make skillful choices in how you manage your mind. That’s a realization of your freedom, that you actually make yourself more trustworthy. Otherwise, you can talk yourself into getting into some really bad habits and convince yourself that you can’t get out. That way, the mind becomes its own worst enemy. As it says in the Dhammapada, there are horrible things you can do to yourself that nobody else can do to you. You can harm yourself more than anybody else can harm you. So it starts with that conviction in your potential for freedom, the choices that you can make. Then you build on that. That’s how you bring value into the mind. So if you want to dedicate your practice to somebody, it’s a practice that they would actually like to have dedicated to them. It’s something that is worthwhile. So try to imbue these qualities into your mind. Find that you can trust yourself more, other people can trust you more. That’s one of the principles of the whole idea of refuge. You take refuge in the Buddha, in the Dhamma, in the Sangha, as you bring those qualities into your mind. You eventually become part of the Sangha that other people can take refuge in, too—the noble Sangha. This is how goodness gets spread around. But it’s up to you to exercise your freedom to choose that. That’s where it all starts.

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