Question Your Defilements

June 4, 2009

There’s a passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about the reasons people give themselves for being lazy and the reasons they give themselves for putting more effort into the practice. And it turns out they’re the same reasons. In fact, it’s one of the more humorous passages in the Canon. There’s a case where a person says, “Well, I’ve been sick and I’m just recovering from my illness, so I think I should rest.” So he doesn’t practice. There’s another person who says, “Well, I’ve just been sick and I’m just recovering from my illness. This illness could get worse. I’d better practice now while I’ve got the chance.” The person going on a trip says, “Tomorrow I’m going on a trip, so I’d better rest up for tonight.” The other person says, “Tomorrow I’m going on a trip. While I’m on the trip, it’s going to be hard to practice, so I’d better practice while I’ve got the chance.” So on down the line. In other words, the effort you put into the practice has to be generated from within. We can give ourselves all kinds of excuses about external situations, internal issues, for not putting an effort into the practice. We say, “Well, I’ll put in some effort, maybe, but I don’t want to go overboard.” Well, exactly where is overboard? You don’t really know until you’ve pushed yourself more than you ordinarily might. It’s our idea of where the middle is in this middle way. It depends on having explored the two extremes. You may not have to go to the same extremes that the Buddha went to, i.e., starving himself to the point where he fainted every time he went out to defecate. But it’s a good principle to try to push yourself harder than you might want to, just to explore exactly how much is too hard. Once you’ve met up with too hard and you know you feel strung out, you’re not sleeping enough, you can’t really concentrate, then you back off. But if you haven’t reached that point yet, you don’t really know where the middle of the middle way is. And Chan Mahaprabhu has a nice passage where he talks about how, for most of us, the middle of the middle way is right in the middle of the pillow. Not the middle of the cushion, the middle of the pillow that we’re lying down on, the middle of the sleeping mat. When the time comes to practice, we don’t want to push ourselves too hard. After all, we’ve got to keep the middleness of the middle way. But when we’re not practicing, when we’re doing other things, the idea of the middleness seems to get tossed aside. Someone else once asked Chan Mahaprabhu about an easy way to become more diligent in the practice, and he said, “Well, that’s the lazy person trying to find the lazy way to become energetic, and it just doesn’t work that way.” You’ve got to have the attitude that Ajaan Fuyang had when he was very young. He came from a poor family. His parents died when he was very young. He was orphaned. He had no connections, no special talents. He didn’t do well in school. And so, as he became a teenager, he began to look at his life and say, “Well, what is this life going? It’s not going in any particular good direction. I’ve got to do something.” So he was convinced that the practice would be a good way to at least build up some merit that he was lacking, build up some good karma that he was lacking. So he said, “Okay, wherever the practice takes me, I want to go, whatever it demands. I want to try to meet those demands.” And as you do that, that’s when you start knowing your defilements. You have to push against them. There’s that old principle of not knowing how strong the current of a river is until you’re trying to put a dam across the river. You find out what those deep currents along the bottom of the river are like, the ones that you don’t see at the surface. It’s only then that you realize, “Oh, this has been ruling my life all along, and I’ve just assumed that that’s just the way I was.” So you let all these unknown forces in your mind take control of your life, and you just take them for granted. An important part of the practice is not taking things for granted, questioning them, putting up some resistance. It’s only when you put up some resistance that they’ll start articulating themselves. You say, “Let’s sit for another hour tonight.” “No, I can’t do that.” “Why not? It doesn’t look like you’re really going to sit for an hour. The mind will just stay quiet.” And you just accept, “Well, I guess I can’t do that.” You say, “Okay, if I don’t get a good reason for not sitting up for an extra hour tonight, I’ll sit up for an extra hour.” Then you start seeing the mind screeching and yelling. And then you can listen to what it has to say. And then you can ask yourself, “Do I really want to identify with that voice, or is it something I would rather learn how to shed?” This principle applies in all areas of the practice, but particularly in the meditation. Because if you don’t push against your defilements, they’ll just push you around all the time. They sneak in and you assume that they’re you and this is the way you are. And you just take it for granted. You end up selling yourself short. Nobody else has to stop you from practice. You’re the one who stops yourself from practicing. And what do you end up with? You end up with the same old stuff, day after day after day. And you don’t get to see what a mind with different habits might be like, a life with different habits. And the sense of ease and refreshment and spaciousness comes when the mind is not pushed around in those ways, and when it can see what’s actually going on inside. This is one of the trickier parts of the hindrances, is that when they arise in the mind, we tend to side with them without even thinking. Lust arises and says, “Yeah, that object I’m lusting for, that person I’m lusting for, that’s really, really attractive.” Anybody would be attracted by that. Or if there’s somebody that you’re really angry at, of course, that person has done things that anybody in his right mind or her right mind would be angry about. When you feel sleepy, you say, “Oh, it’s a sign the body really needs to rest.” When you’re anxious, the things that you’re worried about really are worrisome. The things you doubt really are doubtful. In other words, you go along with the hindrance without even thinking. You take it for granted that that’s the way things are. So you’ve got to learn how to question these things. When you look at the story of the Buddha’s life, the main turning points in his life were the points where he finally came up with a question. He’d been enjoying sensual pleasures for years. Then, gradually, the question began to take shape in his mind. Finally, it was formulated, “Why is it that here I am? I’m subject to aging, illness, and death. I’m looking for my happiness in things that are also subject to aging, illness, and death. Where does that take me?” He opened his mind to the possibility that there might be a deathless happiness. Maybe it’d be worth looking into. So he questioned what he’d been doing, questioned his attitude. He opened his mind to new possibilities. It was this questioning attitude that led him, ultimately, to the path to awakening. Now, he made some false starts. He went down some wrong paths. He said something like, “How about trying to go without food and see what that does, or go without breathing?” He tried it for a long time. Before he realized it, he thought, “This goes nowhere.” Gradually, he was able to hone his questions down to the questions that were really helpful, i.e., what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. “How do I look at my thinking, not in terms of what I believe or what I don’t believe, but in terms of what actually happens as a result of following a particular thought, following a particular idea?” That led him to the Four Noble Truths, to the Four Noble Truths. He was able to see things in terms of dependent-core arising, in other words, processes just arising and passing away in the mind without thinking about, “This is me. This is the way I do things.” He was able to see things in terms of the way things happen, the way suffering comes about, the way stress comes about. What happens if you change the causes? He was not thinking about the kind of person he’d been before or the kind of person he’d been before, whether it was possible for him to change his ways or not. He just said, “Let’s look at it simply in terms of processes. Get the ‘me’ out of there.” He was not saying that there is no ‘me,’ but just saying, “Don’t look in those terms. Just simply see. How does stress arise? How does it pass away? What causes it to arise? What causes it to pass away? What do you do about it?” He was able to hone his questions down so that they really were useful. He found that he couldn’t come to an end of suffering. Think about that. If the Buddha hadn’t been asking those questions, we would have forgotten about a long time ago when just one of those many, many princes who became kings and who reigned for a while and then died. He was forgotten. Or isn’t there a poem by Shalaya Zimandias that’s a big memorial to himself? “Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair.” Well, you look at his works and what it is, it’s just a couple of old legs standing in the desert. That kind of memorial. We have too many of those throughout the world. But the Buddha has a different kind of memorial. It was those questions he asked and his willingness to try something new, to imagine something different. For many of us, we’re stuck in our old ways. It’s a lack of imagination. We can’t imagine ourselves doing anything different. He was able to imagine the possibility of a deathless happiness and imagine that he could do that. Or at least he could give himself over to that quest, give it a try. He made a lot of false starts, but he didn’t let that discourage him. He said, “Let’s try this. Let’s try that.” “Suppose I were to do this. Suppose I were to do that. If it didn’t work, might there be another way?” This was a combination of imagination, determination, and a willingness to put his old habits aside and try something new. That’s what’s really amazing about his life. Those questions where you seem to wake up a little bit, and then when you finally get the answer that it really was an awakening, that’s a tradition that’s been passed down to us. It’s important that we don’t think of it as something that happened a long time ago and that’s it, lost in the midst of myth and fairy tale. When he talks about the path, when he talks about the causes of suffering and stress, they’re all things that are very present in our own minds right now. They’re all possibilities that we can develop, either the possibility for more stress and suffering or the possibility for less. So try to expand your imagination and start questioning things that come up in the mind and say, “Of course it’s going to be this way. This is just the way I am.” You can’t take these things for granted. It’s the things that we take for granted that get in our way. Nobody else stops us from meditating. We’re the ones who stop ourselves from meditating. Nobody else puts obstacles in our path. We’re the ones who put obstacles in our path. But we don’t have to. And there’s a part of the mind that says, “Oh, that’s such a huge task. I’m not up for it.” Well, as with any large task, you try to break it down into small bits. One breath right here, right here, right here, right now. A thought arising right now. Try to break it down. Try to figure out whatever it is that’s arising, whether you like it or not. Is it skillful? Is it not? If it’s not skillful, what are you going to do with it? You might watch it for a while to see what’s going on. Poke at it. Question it a little bit. “Do I really have to believe this?” And see if you can get past it. You might think of all the unskillful thoughts in your mind. They’re like the bark of a tree. They’re just little bits and pieces of the bark, but if you get one little piece off, you’ve done something. And that’s followed by another little piece. And then some new pieces grow back on, but you bit by bit by bit after all you get, so you can strip all the bark off the tree. And if you don’t get all the bark, the fact that you’ve seen at least one unskillful habit go, you realize that you’re no longer unskillful. You’re no longer a slave to that particular subterranean force, because it’s no longer subterranean. You’ve brought it up into the light of awareness. You say, “Oh, I’ve been pushed around by this particular attitude for how many years? It’s something I don’t really seriously believe, but I’ve allowed it to kind of lurk in the corner of my mind and push things here and push things there behind the scenes.” That’s an accomplishment. And the practice is largely about these little accomplishments. You chip here, you chip there. And finally, you hit an important spot where you do a little chip and something bigger falls off, something bigger than you could have imagined. That can happen too. But at the very least, you allow yourself to imagine, “Yes, I could do this practice. Yes, I could put more effort into it.” Instead of having doubts about the practice, you might turn around and have doubts about your defilements. That kind of doubt is encouraged. To recognize, yes, there are defilements in the mind, these things that darken the mind, that obscure it. You may not like the word “defilement,” but think of the fact that your mind is obscured. You don’t want it to be obscured. You’d like it to be clear, open, bright, full of awareness. It can happen. John Fung had a number of lay students who didn’t come to meditation until quite late in life. It may have been the fact that they knew that death was imminent, that they really gave themselves to the practice. And that they really did make big changes in their lives, discovered areas of the mind they had never imagined before. But it’s best if you don’t wait that long. You’ve got the opportunity now. So take advantage of it while you have it.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2009/090604%20Question%20Your%20Defilements.mp3>