Limitations

October 21, 2009

The chance we had just now on developing an attitude of unlimited goodwill, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy or appreciation, and unlimited equanimity—those are among the few ways that the mind really can be without limit. So when you realize that your true happiness doesn’t have to depend on causing anybody any suffering, then it is possible to have unlimited goodwill, wishing all beings happiness. You see anyone is suffering, you wish them to end their suffering. You see people already happy, you wish that they could continue being happy. This, of course, means wishing that people would learn the causes for happiness and act on them. It’s not just like we’re going around with a magic wand and touching people on the head and saying, “May you be happy regardless.” You see a lot of people out there doing all kinds of things that are not leading to happiness. So your wish is, “May they learn how to understand what true happiness is, how it can be found, and actually act on that knowledge.” When we observe the precepts, again, we’re offering unlimited safety. We make up our minds that we’re not going to kill, steal, have illicit sex, lie, take intoxicants—under any conditions. And as the Buddha said, you’re offering unlimited safety to all beings, and you have a share in that safety as well. It’s good to develop an attitude of all these unlimited attitudes and give a sense of spaciousness to the mind. Because there are many areas in life where we really do have to face up to the fact that we have limitations in terms of our time, our energy, our wealth. We have only so much, and there’s so much to be done. This is where equanimity comes in. You focus on the areas that really are important in life, and then you have to develop equanimity for everything else. So you don’t get distracted from the important things by things that are pressing or urgent, or things that are sort of in your face, asking for your attention all the time. Because just because something is urgent or pressing doesn’t mean that it’s important. You have to ask yourself what really is important in your life. And invest your time and energy there. And primarily it’s the condition of your mind. That’s what’s really important. Because if your mind is in good shape, then the rest of the world can be in miserable condition. But you don’t have to suffer from it, and you have the strength to do what’s needed, given the imperfect condition of the world. This is why we meditate. We’re investing our time in the mind, focusing on qualities which, at the very beginning, may not seem much. Mindfulness, alertness—very ordinary, everyday qualities. Mindfulness simply means keeping something in mind, as when we’re focusing on the breath right now. We keep in mind the fact that we want to stay with the breath, regardless of whatever else comes up in the mind. Alertness means keeping watch on what’s actually happening with the breath, what’s happening in the mind. And then you build on these two qualities with the quality of ardency. In other words, you try to do them skillfully. Once you’ve made up your mind to stay with the breath, you try to keep it there and use whatever techniques, whatever strategies you can think of, to keep the mind with the breath. This can include experimenting with the breath and thinking of the breath energy circulating throughout the body. Exploring areas in the body that are tense or tight and use the breath to loosen them up. Or find if there are any parts of the breath cycle where you tend to squeeze things in the body, say, in your neck or in your chest or in your head, and then very consciously not squeeze those things. In other words, make the breath interesting, and it’s a lot easier to stay here. And you may wonder why we’re working with the breath when we’re really trying to aim at the mind. Well, it’s in working with the breath that you develop those qualities of mind. Because mindfulness, as it gets more and more continuous, allows you to see things, allows your alertness to be more continuous as well. And you begin to see what the mind is doing that’s causing unnecessary suffering, unnecessary stress. Because the stress that really weighs on the mind is self-inflicted. In other words, events outside may not be to our liking, but we don’t have to suffer because of those things. It’s because we place our hopes on things outside, invest our time and energy. We build a bridge so that outside events can come in and invade the mind, invade our heart. And the nature of the world is that whatever arises is going to pass away. Things that are brought together by natural conditions are going to have to end through natural conditions. So even though the happiness we hope for would be lasting, we’re normally trying to build that happiness on a foundation that doesn’t last. It’s like building a house. It may be a nice solid house, but its foundation is made out of a house of cards. It’s going to come crashing down. So you want to be able to see how the mind opens itself up to these things and how it can find happiness without having to open itself up. And how it can find the inner strength it needs to deal with aging, illness, death, and separation as they come. So it can maintain its goodness. It can maintain its inner sense of well-being. And not only for your own sake, because if you have that inner sense of well-being, you’re much more likely to be able to do the skillful thing in any situation. So the wisest investment, given the fact that we have limited time and energy, is in developing the qualities of the mind. And they start with mindfulness and alertness, because you can’t see what’s going on in the mind unless your alertness is continuous. Normally our understanding of our own minds is like a connect-the-dots. We notice a little thing here, a little thing over there, scattered points of insight. But we don’t see how they all connect, and so we tend to make up lines to put things together. And who knows if the lines have anything to do with what’s actually there? If you want to see what’s really going on in the mind, your awareness has to be as continuous as possible. This requires that your mindfulness be strong, that your alertness be quick, and that you really are ardent in developing these qualities. And so that puts you in a position where you can learn how to see what the skillful thing is to do, or say, or think, and actually bring yourself to be able to do it. When you notice that you’re acting in an unskillful way, you can learn to stop. One of the great ironies of life is that we all want happiness, and yet we keep doing things to cause our self-suffering. And when it’s pointed out to us, we many times say, “Well, that’s the only way to be done. I’ve got to do it that way. That’s my way. Or I’ve done it so long, I can’t think of changing.” This is where the meditation asks us to step outside of ourselves for a while and just look at our lives like an anthropologist from Mars. So you can see that certain habits we have that we’re really attached to are actually causing us more suffering. And if we could learn to see that we don’t have to follow those habits, that there are alternatives that don’t cause suffering, we’re much more likely to let them go. So even though mindfulness and alertness sound like very ordinary things, when you make them continuous, they have a very revelatory effect. It has an effect on your understanding of the mind, on your understanding of your heart, on your understanding of why it is that you feel stressed, why it is that you feel suffering. And the good news here is that it’s your own habits that are causing the suffering, which means that you can change. If you’re suffering were something necessarily imposed on you by outside conditions, there’d be no escape. But as the Buddha pointed out, the true suffering comes from the fact that we are these slaves to craving. Not only do we crave things, but we crave the things we like, but we like the act of craving itself. So we have to look at that, because that’s why we’re suffering. So even though there may be a lot of work here, it may require a lot of digging around in the mind, it is good news. There’s a problem, but something can be done about it. Here’s the solution. When the Buddha talks about stress and suffering, it’s not that he’s pessimistic. He’s just being a good doctor. You go to the doctor, and the doctor asks you, “Where does it hurt?” You don’t accuse the doctor of being pessimistic. Why do you think everybody walking into your office has pain? Well, it’s because that’s the doctor’s job. That’s why we all go to the doctor. That’s the same with the Buddha. He’s offering a way to put an end to suffering. So he’s assuming that anyone who wants to come and listen to him has some suffering in life that they’d like to get rid of. He talks so much about suffering, not because he’s pessimistic, but because he’s very optimistic that there’s a way out. And it starts with these simple practices, learning to observe the precepts, learning to have good will for all beings—the unlimited side of the practice. It gives us a sense of space and also energy, so we don’t get tied down by the realization that we have only a limited amount of time and a limited amount of energy to really focus on what’s important. But the even better news is, if you learn how to focus your time and energy on what’s really important, you finally reach something deep down inside the mind which is even more unlimited than good will and more unlimited than the precepts. That’s a dimension that’s totally unlimited by any of our concepts. So we know all the talk is about stress and suffering and craving. The message is about unlimited freedom. So try to keep that perspective in mind.

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