Inner Discontent

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Training the mind is like training a child. You have to have a sense of when to be gentle with it and when to be strict. And this is a sense that you can develop only over time, which means that there are going to be some times when you practice, times when you push yourself way too hard. So you get frazzled and you begin to get discouraged. Other times when you don’t push yourself enough, just kind of let everything go with the flow. And after a while you begin to realize that going with the flow is like going with the flow of water. Everything just kind of flows downhill. This means that you need standards and you need to learn how to be observant, to get a sense of what you’re doing, when it’s working and when it’s not working. This is when the meditation becomes a lifelong practice, a lifelong project. You’re doing it just for a weekend or two. You just simply listen to the instructions and try to follow them through as best you can. And if things don’t work out, you can say, “Well, the instructions weren’t all that good.” And you go look for another teacher, another practice. But when you realize that you’re doing it and you look at your life and you say, “I’m suffering. There’s something wrong here.” The Buddha actually encourages that perception that there’s something wrong. He doesn’t tell you to accept everything with equanimity and just let it be. A sense of contentment, a sense of equanimity works in some cases, but not in all. An important part of the practice is learning how to gain a sense of when you just let things be. Either because you don’t have to get involved with them at all or you let them be for a while, so you get a sense of what’s going on. But you look at the Buddha’s life and you realize that he himself was motivated by the strong sense that something is wrong. There’s suffering. Here he is himself, he said, subject to aging, illness and death. And he’s looking for happiness and other things that are also subject to aging, illness and death. There’s something not right here. So that sense that something’s wrong, something’s not quite right, that was his motivation. That’s what got him started. And ultimately he began to see that something was wrong. It’s not so much what’s wrong out there, it’s what’s wrong in here. This is why when he talks about contentment, it has to do with things outside. You have to content yourself with whatever food, clothing, shelter you get. Realizing if you have enough, well, that’s plenty right there. And getting a realistic view of what enough means. And usually it’s a lot less than we tend to think. We get by on a lot less than we normally have. He has you develop that kind of contentment because he wants you to look inside to realize, okay, as long as there’s still suffering in the mind, you can’t be content with what’s going on in the mind. You have to be very careful, you have to be very watchful to figure out exactly what is it that you’re doing that’s causing suffering. As you look at your actions, as you look at your words, as you look at your thoughts, for there are potential to cause pain, suffering, stress. You should keep your focus right here. And as long as the work is not done, as long as you haven’t learned to weed out every form of unskillful behavior, yes, you acknowledge the fact that there is something wrong. You don’t just accept things as they are. Sometimes you have to accept that when you’ve made a mistake, okay, you’ve made a mistake. Learn how to accept that. But you don’t stop with the acceptance. The next step is to figure out, well, the next time around, how can I improve on this? How can I learn not to make that mistake? And how can you always also encourage the set of skills that you can depend on, i.e., developing things that are right in the mind that can give you the strength to keep going? Because this perception of your own mistakes is often hard to take unless you’ve got a good, solid sense of well-being to fall back on. In addition to being something wrong, there’s also something right. And you look for what that something right might be in terms of your virtue, in terms of your commitment, in terms of your mindfulness concentration. How do you make these things right or even more reliable than they are now? So it’s not simply a case of learning how to accept them, “Well, that’s just the way things are.” If the Buddha had been that kind of person, just accepting that that’s the way things are, we wouldn’t have heard of him. Just one more prince who was satisfied with his life, never did anything special, never left behind any special knowledge or skills, and then we wouldn’t have anything to work with our own suffering. But he was the sort of person that realized there was something wrong. And he wanted to find a way of looking deeply into his own mind to see exactly where it had come from. So it’s important, as you continue with the practice, that you have that sense that in a manner there’s something wrong, but there’s also something right. But what’s right is still not good enough, and what’s wrong is still too powerful in the mind. This is why right effort is such an important part of the practice. You may have noticed as we were chaining the sutta just now in the analysis of the path, the first five factors are fairly short. And again, in the long ones, the ones that are devoted to concentration, starting with right effort, many times we’re told that efforting is a bad part of the practice. Something is going to get in the way of your just being with things as they are. But that’s not what the Buddha said. You’ve got unskillful qualities, and when you learn how to recognize them, you want to develop the desire to get rid of them. And then there are skillful qualities. You want to develop the desire to give rise to those. You have both potentials in the mind. That’s going to require work to sort things out. You are making a change in the mind as you practice. And if you find that unskillful qualities are coming up in the mind, on the one hand, don’t get discouraged. Everybody has to meet up with these things, and an important part of the concentration is learning how to deal with them. You may not like to keep finding the mind wandering off, wandering off, but if that’s what the mind is doing, then that’s what you’ve got to deal with. So if you find it wandering off, just bring it right back. If it wanders off again, as soon as you catch it, bring it right back. And then try to be quicker and quicker in how you catch it. It’s that determination to be quicker that’s what’s going to make your concentration more solid, your mindfulness more continuous. Once you’ve got that mindfulness and developed that concentration, well, you try to develop it even further. You’ll find in the beginning that it comes in phases. There’ll be a little phase of concentration, then it disappears. And then you start it up again. It’ll go for a little while and then disappear. Try to get a sense of what that rhythm is and exactly what happens as things begin to unravel. That may not seem like much. You may wonder, “What are we doing here, just working with the breath, keeping it focused on this one little thing when there’s so many bigger issues in life?” Well, you need a mind well-trained in order to deal with those bigger issues. Remind yourself of that and just keep coming back to the breath. And when you find that the mind is beginning to lose its focus, what can you do to ramp things up so the focus stays continuous? It’s these little things that make all the difference. So if there’s something to be contented with right here, it’s contenting yourself with what has to be done right now, where you are in the path, what is the task that has to be done, rather than wondering about when all the great insights are going to come. Because big insights come from little insights. They come from learning from them. It’s not a matter of suddenly getting this pristine vision of the world, “Oh, that’s what the world is all about. This is what the meaning of life is all about.” It’s more just noticing little things about the mind and then taking advantage of those little things that you notice as tools to develop further mindfulness, further concentration. You may wonder when you’re going to get to the big stuff, but the big stuff lies in the little stuff. And finding this balance between contentment and discontent. Discontent with the sense that things are not yet right in the mind. And contentment with, “Oh, this is the lesson I’ve got to learn right now. Okay, I’ll learn this lesson.” You’re not so proud that you’re only going to wait for the great insights, or a wonderful sense of interconnectedness, or whatever. What little work has to be done right now, what little tasks have to be done right now, don’t regard them as unimportant. John Munn once made the comment, “It’s not the case that people often get logs in their eyes, but they do get sawdust in their eyes, and it can blind them.” The little things can blind you. So you work on the little things. Then as you’re observing the little things, you begin to notice the subtleties in how the mind creates stress for itself, how it looks for the wrong things, cultivates the wrong attitudes. How a little bit of anger can, if you don’t watch out for it, if you’re not alert to it, it can grow into something really big. And once it’s taken over the mind, then it’s really difficult to pull yourself free from it. So this is what the discontent comes down to. It means being very watchful, realizing that you can’t trust everything that comes along in the mind. You’ve got to test things. And as soon as you recognize that something is unskillful, you’ve got to do something about it. Because if you don’t, it’ll grow, it’ll fester, it’ll take over. So this is where you’ve got to keep watch. And this is why the Buddha recommends that you’re content with your outside situation. So you can focus your discontent on what’s going on inside. And again, you have to be very careful how you balance things out here. You may not like where you are in the practice, you’d like to be further along, but this is where you are right now. And the only way you’re going to get further along is to take whatever step is the next step. But it’s our willingness to keep taking the next step, and the next step, and the next step. That’s what gets you to the end of the path. And it really is something special, as the Buddha said. You see things that you never saw before. You learn things you never learned before. You attain things you never attained before. That requires that you do things you never did before. Not necessarily. It requires throwing yourself into it all at once, exhausting yourself in the practice, doesn’t help. But it does mean putting more of it than you might want to into the path, and sticking with it, even as it gets hard, with the conviction that there have got to be rewards here. That’s the part of right effort, generating desire, and sometimes generating desire means generating that sense of conviction, nourishing it, looking around and seeing all the suffering around you, and realizing if there’s any way out, it’s in this path of looking into your mind and not accepting everything that’s there, trying to do something about it. So be very clear about what you have to accept and what you don’t have to accept, where you should be content and where you should foster this sense of discontent. There are no quick and easy answers to these questions, but then again, this is how you develop discernment, this is how you develop insight. Realizing that there are distinctions you have to make, and with trial and error, finding out exactly where the line is drawn.

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