Timeless Practice

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John Mahambo tells of the time when he was a young monk studying in Bangkok. His plan was to complete the third grade of Pali studies and then go out and practice. But the one thing that kept him back was a teaching that was circulating around Bangkok at the time, which was that the paths and fruitions of Dhamma, even the practice of jhana, was no longer possible. The time for these things had passed. And it was only when he was able to get past that teaching that he realized that it was an obstacle and didn’t really fit in with the principle that the Dhamma is timeless. That’s when he was able to get out and really practice. So you see this teaching cropping up here and there. Sometimes in the Theravada where they talk about no more openings for nirvana, no more openings even for jhana. Sometimes in the Mahayana where they talk about the dormant ending age. You have to regard those teachings simply as obstacles, as excuses for people who don’t want to practice. In the case of Thailand earlier in the twentieth century, it was an excuse for the government to get monks to do things besides their basic practice of virtue, concentration, and discernment, leading to release. But those excuses have no force if you don’t want them to have any force. It’s up to you to decide whether you’re going to make this your dhamma ending age or a dhamma opening age. Because the dhamma is a truth that’s always true if you practice virtue, concentration, and discernment. And develop all the qualities that the Buddha described, either in the Five Strengths or in the Four Bases for Success or the Seven Factors for Awakening. That path is going to take you to the goal. It’s your choice. But as Ajahn Fung once said, to achieve that timeless goal and to follow that timeless path, you have to make your practice timeless. In other words, it’s not something you do just on a weekend or some certain hours of the day and not other hours of the day. It’s got to be continuous, something you keep at regardless of whatever you’re doing outside. The monastery does have a schedule. There’s the time for work, there’s the time for sitting with your eyes closed, there’s time for eating, time for cleaning up. There’s time for being with other people, time for being alone. But you shouldn’t take those times as excuses for not sticking with the breath, for not developing the mind. Each time has its own challenges. But you want to learn how to keep with the breath, keep grounded, keep centered, regardless of what those challenges are. Otherwise, the day gets divided up into times, chopped up into little bits. And your practice gets chopped up into little bits. It doesn’t develop any momentum. It doesn’t develop any strength. But if you make up your mind that whatever you’re going to do, you’re going to make it an aspect of the practice, when you’re working, you’re dealing with other people, you practice restraint of the senses. Because, after all, you do have to look and listen and engage in all your senses. So there’s your task right there. Noticing how you create fetters around what you see and hear and smell and taste and touch, think about it. Because, after all, the sights are not a fetter. Your eye is not a fetter. It’s the clinging, the delight, the passion that you have. That’s the fetter there. The same with what you hear, the things you hear, the fact that you can hear. It’s not a fetter. Some people think that for concentration they’ve got to block out all their senses. That’s not what the Buddha taught. Because he said the senses are not a fetter. It’s sensuality. He said you seclude yourself from sensuality, which means that you seclude yourself from your obsession with thinking about sensual things. You learn to drop that, because that’s the fetter. We tend to delight a lot more in our fantasies about sensual pleasures than we do in the pleasures themselves. So as you’re going through the day, notice how you look at things, how you listen to things, where you’re trying to stir up passion, where you’re trying to stir up aversion or delusion by the way you look, by the way you listen. There’s somebody that you don’t like, or you take delight in seeing them do something wrong. That just furthers your dislike. It doesn’t justify it, but it’s unhealthy for the mind. If you see someone who’s attracted to something, there’s a tendency to focus on whatever there is attractive about them, but to ignore the fact that the human body has a lot of unattractive features. Last week on the way to Zion we happened to go through Las Vegas. There was a sign up for that body exhibition where they have the plasticized corpses displaying what’s inside the body. It was right next to a strip show, which shows you the human mind’s amazing ability to close off certain details when it doesn’t want to notice them. We see that in other people and we find it amusing. The thing is, it’s going on in our own engagement with the senses all the time. So as you’re going around through the day, restraint of the senses is one thing you can practice all the time. That’s one way of maintaining your center. In fact, maintaining your center is also one way of restraining yourself at the senses. You try to keep this sense of being with the breath, being in the body, being sensitive to the energy flow in the body, regardless of what you’re looking at or listening to. When you notice that you’ve lost that sense of being, you realize that you’ve been sucked into the world of your senses. And you would immediately check, “Okay, what was it that sucked you in? What was your intention?” and allowing yourself to get sucked in. Restraint of speech is another way that you can practice. Be very careful about what you say. John Fung’s dictum. You can’t control your mind until you learn how to control your tongue. This is very important because you want to make sure that the things you say are not only true but also beneficial and timely. The question he would have you ask is, “Is this really necessary to say this?” And so many times it’s not. If it’s not necessary, you’ll be quiet. And if you become known for being a quiet person, that’s perfectly fine. We’re in a monastery. That’s okay. You don’t have to be entertaining. You don’t have to be witty. You don’t have to show off your intelligence or show off anything at all. This is how you develop mindfulness. Remember, the Buddha’s image for mindfulness is of a gatekeeper in a fortress who has to be very careful about who he lets in and who he doesn’t let in, who he lets out and who he doesn’t let out. We sometimes hear mindfulness defined as a very open and choiceless awareness, but that’s not the Buddha’s definition. His definition was of this quality to see what’s coming in, see what’s going out, and immediately gauge its level of skill, whether it’s appropriate or not. And be very firm about shutting down the things that are unskillful and allowing only the things that are skillful. Another aspect of timeless practice is simply observing the precepts, making sure that your actions cause no harm. Because if you find yourself breaking any of the precepts, that carelessness is going to come into the mind. And whatever regret there comes from having harmed either yourself or other people becomes an obstacle. Either you deny the harm, in which case you set up even more ignorance in the mind, or you wound yourself again and again and again with regret. So either way, it’s an open wound or it’s a scabbed over wound. And it’s an obstacle keeping the mind centered and concentrated. There are two other qualities that the Buddha lists that are appropriate for a new monk, and they’re appropriate for everybody who practices. One is finding seclusion in quiet places, preferably out in the wilderness if you can. If not, find a quiet spot where you’re not disturbed. So you really can look directly at the mind and at the same time develop right view. This may require some reading, it may require some listening, but the view that your actions are important. It’s not a question of whether this is the Dhamma ending age or the Dhamma opening age or whatever age. It’s your actions that determine whether you’re going to be ending the Dhamma or finding an opening. The skills you need can be developed if you’re intent on developing them, if you don’t put up obstacles to yourself. So as you do this, you find that your practice does become timeless, because it’s there all the time. You’re engaged in the practice all the time. And as you go through the day, you find there will be lapses. Well, notice when they happen. And as quickly as possible, get yourself back into center again. I mentioned the other day in Jon Fuehn’s instruction that if you are doing a task and you find that you’ve lost your center, stop for a second, regain your center, and then continue. You find yourself wandering off in greed, anger, lust, jealousy, envy, whatever the unskillful emotion, stop. Gather the mind. And then you can continue with whatever task you’ve got going. This way you begin to bridge those gaps in your mindfulness. So it does become continuous. It just keeps going and going and going and going and doesn’t really have to rest and doesn’t really have to stop, because in the fact of being mindful and being centered, there is rest there already. It takes practice, because this is a new habit. But once the habit takes hold, you find that this is a much better way of going through the day. You’re more refreshed, more energized, and you’re not placing obstacles in your own path. So whether the Dhamma is going to be timeless for you or not depends on how timeless you make your own practice. It’s up to you.

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