Integrity of the Heart

May 5, 2010

Years back, when the first English translations from the forest tradition were beginning to come out, one of their striking features was that they talked about the training of the heart. Then Westerners who had come to Theravada Buddhism before that, largely through what They’d read about the Pali Canon or heard about some of the meditation techniques that took a very technical approach to how you would train the mind. And it was very much training of the mind. They objected to the idea that this was a training of the heart. Emotions were too messy. There was even a book, What the Buddha Taught, which at the very end had a discussion of the Brahma-viharas. The author had trouble fitting the Brahma-viharas into the rest of the teaching, because everything else, as someone once said, was like Bertrand Russell in robes. All very logical, all very clear and well-reasoned. But the author couldn’t put the Brahma-viharas into that framework. It didn’t seem to fit. It was just kind of a misunderstanding, maybe an accident, that somehow this very technical understanding of the mind had also developed some teachings on kindness, which is one extreme in understanding what the path is all about. We’re just learning how to readjust our perceptions of the world and our perceptual framework. And you get the perceptual framework right and somehow you’ve solved all the problems. But if you actually look at the word citta in Pali, it means both heart and mind. It has those meanings in Thai as well. I’m told it has the same meaning. The word for mind in Tibetan also means heart. In other words, it connects both the cognitive faculties and the emotional faculties. It’s important that we bring the two of these together, because they’re not really all that separate. It’s not the case that your reason functions in one part of the mind and your emotions function in another, and they’re really different. Your emotions have their reasons and your reasons have their emotions. You have certain emotional reasons for why you look at the world in a certain way. And all your different emotions, as they’re jockeying for power in the mind as to what you’re going to do, what you’re going to think, what you’re going to say, they present their reasons for why you should go with them. Now, sometimes the reasons are pretty poor, in which case they tend to get very insistent. I’ve had a number of people write critiques, say, of the book I’d read in the Vinaya, and I began to notice that when their reasons were good, they didn’t have to get obnoxious or snide. But when their reasons were poor, their evidence was poor, they would get just really abusive, as if somehow the force of their abusiveness would make up for the lack of evidence. And this is the way it is in the mind. Some of our most unreasonable emotions are the ones that have really poor reasons and are the ones that tend to be most insistent. And we often give in to them just because they are insistent. So as we’re training both the heart and the mind, this is one point we have to understand is that they’re not really distinct. Another point that’s important, though, is to realize that when we talk about qualities of the heart, for most people that simply means kindness, compassion. And kindness and compassion, especially as we see them here in our country, turn into indulgence. You’re kind to your children when you buy them what they ask for. You’re kind to your friends when you let them do what they want. That’s not necessarily kindness at all. True kindness, true compassion, think about the long term. Realize that if you indulge people in the short term, sometimes it ruins them. And often the most compassionate thing you can do for someone is to point out where they’re acting in harmful ways. And to be able to do this requires other strengths of the heart as well. Holding firmly to your principles, that’s a quality of the heart. It’s loyalty. Uprightness is also a quality of the heart. In other words, realize that when you have to stand by a principle, even though it means that you’re going to have to make some sacrifices. So the desire to do something really well, to have integrity, is a quality of the heart that we have to train as we practice. Because there are times when the things that we would like to do really are not in our best interest. Or the things that the people around us would like to have us do are not in their best interest or our best interest. And you have to be able to say no. I remember when John Fruin told me one time that you can’t trust people who want to be popular. I think I’ve told the story about the treasurer, Ghi, at the monastery. Before he appointed him as treasurer, he asked him, “Which is more important, to be wealthy or to be popular?” And Ghi said, “To be wealthy.” Because if you have money, you can buy people. You can buy popularity. And that was what John Fruin wanted to hear. Take that and think about it for a while. He wanted a treasurer who was not going to give in to people, just out of fear that they might not like him for saying no about something. And as Ghi knew that if you look after the money of a monastery and you do it well, one of the karmic rewards down the way is that you are trusted with more wealth. I remember really being struck by that conversation, because it struck me as a strange choice that a John Fruin had given him. I had to think about it for a bit. Because often here in the West we equate wealth with people getting unfair wealth, or being born wealthy, or having attained wealth through unfair methods. But from the Buddhist point of view, solid wealth is something that comes from integrity. You give good value. And that kind of wealth is the wealth that lasts. It’s the wealth that doesn’t destroy you. You can think about this both on external and internal levels. But what comes down to us is that we tend to miss that one of the most important qualities of the heart is just integrity and the willingness to stand by your principles, even though they may be unpopular, they may cause trouble. But it’s an act of kindness, and that’s an important quality of the heart that we develop as we practice. Because if you can’t say no to other people’s defilements, how on earth are you going to be able to say no to your own defilements? When greed and anger and delusion come, they’ll have their reasons, and they’ll have their ways of being persuasive. And you have to learn how to see through them. And as we all know, seeing through our own defilements is a lot harder than seeing through others. It’s very easy to look at other people and say, “Oh, that’s greed acting there, and that’s anger, and that’s pride, and that’s anger.” If you want to, you can make a whole catalog of all the defilements of the people here in the monastery to say nothing of all the people out there in the world. But where does it get you? You have to be able to look at your own defilements and to see how they like to deceive you, and how they like to trick you, and how they lead you along. Vassaka Ghi likes to talk about being led around by the nose by the defilements. An image there is where they lead water buffaloes around by the nose in Thailand. They put a ring through the nose and attach a rope to the ring. And wherever they want the water buffalo to go, they just pull on the ring. And because it hurts its nose, it has to go in the right direction. So that’s what greed does to us. It pulls us around by the nose. Anger, delusion, pride. Like with anger, when you get really angry, there’s a sense of being stirred up inside, physically. You feel like you have to get it out of your system somehow. That’s anger leading you around by the nose. Other times the defilements come with sweet words, “This is good for you,” “You deserve a little present for yourself,” as if indulging yourself or being kind to yourself. It’s like the teachers we had in school. The ones we liked were the ones who were indulgent, and the ones we hated were the ones who were strict with us. But oftentimes it was the ones who were strict that taught us the most. The ones who were most demanding held us to a high standard and didn’t care whether they were popular or not. So among the qualities we want to develop here as we practice is this one of integrity. When you see something is right, you hold to it. And it will involve some sacrifices. But if we can’t sacrifice for things that are really worthwhile, then the practice isn’t really getting to our heart. So we’re training both the mind and the heart. And in training the heart, it’s not just a matter of being nice or compassionate or kind in the indulgent way. Kindness and compassion, in their truest form, have to stand on integrity. And whether other people appreciate your integrity or not, that’s not the issue. You can’t let your goodness depend on their approval. I learned this when I was looking after Chan Phuong. When he was sick, a lot of his students had lots of different ideas about what would be good ways to help him get over his illness. I was getting pressure from all sides to do this for him or provide that. There was one time I knew that they were recommending something he probably wouldn’t like, but I tried recommending it. He snapped right back at me and said, “Whose servant are you? Are you their servant?” He wasn’t implying that I was his servant, but he said, “Are you their servant?” I said, “No.” He said, “Why do you just follow what they say?” He snapped at me with a lot of the criticism that came with it. I said, “We told Dhan Japa to do this, but he wouldn’t do it.” That’s one of the reasons why we have that part of the chant every evening. The Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha are my master. In other words, the good qualities that they recommend, the good qualities that they teach, those are the ones we want to have in charge of our minds. This is quality of truthfulness and integrity. That’s the big one that strengthens all the other good qualities of the mind and the heart so that they become true as well. As Ajahn Lee often said, the Buddhist teachings are a matter of the truth. And they’ll be true for us only when we’re true, too. They don’t just tell about the truth. They come from a quality of heart that’s true. And we’ll reach them only when we can develop that quality in our hearts as well.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2010/100505%20Integrity%20of%20the%20Heart.mp3>