Self Discipline

June 20, 2010

We come to the monastery to find an environment that’s healthy for the mind. Part of it’s the physical environment, having a quiet place. For the past couple weeks, the weather has been ideal. You can stay outside. Meditate in comfort, without too many disturbances. Years back, we had someone come who’d only meditated inside meditation retreat centers, inside buildings. The first day he was here, he came back and complained there was too much noise out in the orchard. I said, “Too much noise?” He said, “Yes, the sound of the lizards and the leaves and the wind blowing through the trees.” But those aren’t the kind of noises that really impinge on the mind. And so it’s a good physical environment to practice. It’s a good mental environment as well. The values all point toward the mind. The bottom line here is how well you’re training your mind. Some things in the monastery aren’t run as efficiently as they might. But if efficiency became our primary interest, or money became the bottom line, then the mind would suffer, the practice would suffer. So here’s a place where the top priority is training the mind. When you leave the monastery, you can’t take the physical environment with you. You can find other places where there’s seclusion. But the most important thing is learning how to take the mental environment, the values that give priority to the mind. Because outside of the monastery, it’s very hard to find places like that. So you have to create your own world of your own attitude, your own values. Because otherwise, you’re just slipping into other people’s values and the things that are important to them suddenly become pressing for you. And you have to learn how to put up a wall, not against other people, but against their attitudes, their mind states, to make sure they don’t come seeping into yours. This requires a certain amount of self-discipline. You’ve probably heard the many stories of people who say, “The forested giants, I don’t have enough time to meditate.” And the giants will always say, “Well, do you have enough time to breathe?” Of course you do. So the question is, do you have the right values to stay with the breath, to protect yourself from getting overwhelmed by all the other values that come pushing in on you? And keeping that distinction clear is the difference between what’s pressing and what’s important. Because sometimes you have to press back. Say, “No, I’m not going there. No, I’m not accepting that particular attitude.” Then keep reminding yourself of what is important and why you want to practice. As the Buddha said, one of the elements of right effort is learning how to generate the desire to keep practicing. So the discipline is not just brute force. It’s actually something you want to do. Then you have to keep reminding yourself of why you want to practice. This is one of the important functions of mindfulness, this ability to keep something in mind, to keep your values in mind. Searched around in the text and found a variety of ways in which the Buddha helps you spark your motivation. One is a sense of sanghvega, just realizing that life is so fleeting and there’s so much meaninglessness that goes on. There’s so much in life that really doesn’t accomplish anything at all. The word sanghvega actually means to take terror, the sense that time is slipping through your fingers right now. What are you accomplishing? What are you getting out of it? You see birth, aging, illness, and death, separation all around you. There are these big problems, and what are you doing about it? This connects with another quality you want to keep in mind, and that’s heedfulness. Your actions really do make a difference, which means that you have to be careful in your actions. You can’t simply assume that if you’re acting on good intentions, things will work out well in the end. Because sometimes good intentions have a lot of delusion. That’s what turns a good intention into an unskillful intention. So you have to remind yourself that even though you may mean well, there are times when you really don’t know what you’re doing and you end up causing more harm than help. So you really have to learn to watch your actions, watch your intentions, watch the results of your actions. If you’ve made a mistake, remind yourself that you don’t want to make that mistake again. The Buddha recommends developing a sense of shame around your mistakes. Now, this doesn’t mean being ashamed of yourself. It means being ashamed of the action. It’s that kind of shame that comes not with low self-esteem, but with high self-esteem. You see that that particular action was beneath you. You want to do better. That way you help remind yourself of the lessons that you’ve learned from your actions. Because all too often we make a mistake and we just cover it up in forgetfulness because we don’t even like to go there. It requires a certain amount of maturity to want to remember your mistakes so you can learn from them. So you can always do better the next time. Another quality the Buddha recommends keeping in mind is compassion. When you act in a skillful way, you really are acting for the good of yourself and for the good of others. If you really do want to find happiness, if you really do want other people to be happy, you want to act as skillfully as you can in your thoughts, in your words, in your deeds. You can work on your meditation to give yourself a good, solid foundation. You’ll find that the more you really do help people, the more you’re cutting back on your greed, aversion, and delusion. And you’re not the only person in the world suffering from your greed, aversion, and delusion. Other people suffer from it too. So when you cut back on those qualities, other people are less afflicted by them. And the final quality the Buddha recommends developing is a strange one. It’s pride. Pride in your sense of accomplishment. Pride in your ability to train yourself. The kind of pride that comes with craftsmanship. This is not the self-esteem that comes from just saying, “Well, you should feel good about yourself regardless.” It comes when you say you really have done something well. When you have the capacity to do things well. It starts out, as the Buddha said, by noticing other people have been able to develop skill, they’ve been able to put an end to suffering. They’re human beings. You’re a human being. They can do it. Why can’t you? And then you build on that as you find that you actually can become more and more skillful. You can change. You can change your habits. You notice when there are times when you would have said something that would have set things off, but you’re able to hold yourself back. Or events happen that you would normally get upset, and you find you’re not getting upset, you can maintain your cool, maintain your calm, your equanimity. Notice those things. And as the Buddha said, it’s perfectly fine to take joy in them, to have a sense of accomplishment. If you find that you have an addiction and tonight you’re tempted, really tempted, to give in to the addiction, remind yourself that tomorrow morning when you wake up you’re going to feel really glad that you didn’t. And on the days when you don’t give in and you do wake up and feel better, remember that. Hold that in mind. So the next time you feel tempted, you remind yourself, “Tomorrow morning I’m going to feel really good that I didn’t do this.” That kind of pride really is helpful. You don’t really give up conceit, the Buddha said, until arahantship. So you might as well use it to a good purpose. So when you take the monastery home, part of it’s taking the skills and working with the breath as we do here, because the skills you develop in breathing meditation are not meant for when you’re sitting with your eyes closed. The ability to breathe comfortably in any situation is a really helpful skill when things get difficult. The ability to notice patterns of tension in the body and to breathe through them is useful for when greed comes in, or fear comes in, or anger comes in. You want to get a handle on it without letting it take over your sense of the body. So if you’ve got something in your system, you’ve got to get out of your system. If you can breathe through the tension, you’ve got the body on your side instead of acting against you. At times when the mind feels lost, you can always come back to the breath. When you’re stuck in a situation where there’s nothing to do, waiting in line, waiting in a doctor’s office, sitting in a meeting, you can work with your breath. Nobody else has to know. These are skills you can use in all kinds of situations. But it’s not just the skills. It’s also creating the environment for yourself, the mental environment of what’s important. Remembering that time slips past, slips past. As the Buddha said, one of the things you should reflect on is days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I becoming? What sort of person are you becoming as you allow old habits to take over? Or if you can create new habits that make you wiser, more skillful, a better friend to yourself and a better friend to the people around you. Self-discipline is not just a matter of holding a stick over yourself and beating yourself every time you don’t do what you decided to do. That kind of discipline doesn’t last very long at all. You really want to be able to generate the desire that this is something you really want to do. You want to make something out of your life. You don’t want other people’s priorities to barge in on your life. You don’t want to take away the things that are important. So you suddenly find yourself at the end with no more time, no more energy. What time you did have and what energy you did have was all wasted away. That’s not what you want. You want to be able to look back and say, “Okay, I was able to carve out a space for what’s really important in my life.” And give it a chance to grow. So it’s both a matter of the skills and of the values that you can use to generate the desire to abandon what’s unskillful, to develop what’s skillful, and to train the mind so that it is your own best friend.

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