Friendly Duties

December 4, 2010

We are trying to develop the skills to overcome our own delusion and ignorance. So it’s good to know what we’re trying to overcome. The Buddha uses the two words with different meanings. Delusion is, in general, not knowing, being confused about things. Ignorance is defined as not knowing in terms of the Four Noble Truths, or lack of knowledge with regard to the Four Noble Truths. The word for ignorance, avijja, is the opposite of vijja. Vijja is not just knowledge, but it’s also skill. We’re here trying to overcome our lack of skill with regard to the Four Noble Truths. This applies particularly to the duties for each truth. We’re trying to comprehend suffering and stress, trying to abandon the cause so that we can realize the cessation of suffering and stress. And to do that, we have to also develop the factors of the path. These are the skills that we’re trying to master. So as you’re meditating, remember, it’s not just one thing you’re doing. There are some meditation techniques that tend to limit you and say, “Just do this, this, this, this, over and over and over again.” But the Buddha actually divided your duties up into four. The word duty here sometimes sounds onerous. I think especially what it tends to mean in the Western tradition. There are things you have to do whether you want to or not. And many times those duties have nothing to do with whether you’re going to be happy about it. But the Buddha’s duties are different. As he says, you may not like them, but they are for your true happiness. They’re duties that have your ultimate well-being as their main goal. So the relationship is different. Because the duties here are not just things that you grit your teeth and get through and hope there’ll be a reward at the end. It’s in the process of doing the duties that the happiness begins to appear, that the level of suffering in the mind begins to go down. This, of course, doesn’t mean that everything’s going to be easy, because the mind has a lot of resistance. Some of our ignorance is simply a lack of knowledge, and sometimes it’s willed. There are parts of the mind that really resist making sacrifices now for the sake of a greater happiness down the line. There’s a part of the mind that wants immediate gratification. A part of the Buddha’s strategy here is that you develop mental skills that will ultimately give you a sense of well-being in the present moment. That’s what the concentration practice is for. This is why when states of concentration come up in the mind, you don’t simply watch them come and go. You actively try to give rise to them, and once they’re there, you try to maintain them. This requires effort to begin with, but as with any skill, if you pay attention to what you’re doing, you learn how to do it more efficiently. So you increase the amount of pleasure in comparison to the amount of effort. So it’s not that all the rewards of happiness are at the end of the path. You begin to develop them along the way. But even then, they’re not automatic. Some people have a lot of trouble getting them off the path. Some people find it a lot easier. Then you don’t get to choose. When you find that it’s difficult, it requires a lot of conviction that this is going to work, that you are going to stick with it. You think of all the great discoveries in the past. They were great because it took effort. If they were easy, they wouldn’t be considered that great. Everybody would know them. But the really important things do take effort. So the duties here are not things that the Buddha established or the Buddha was a lawgiver. You simply notice that this is the way things are. You have to do things this way. When they say that the great way is not difficult for people with no preferences, this is the only way it really makes sense. You do whatever is required. After all, we are here to put an end to suffering. We’re not here to say, “Okay, suffering is okay, and lack of suffering is okay, and we’re not going to be concerned whether one or the other comes.” We are here for the end of suffering. Lack of preference means that we’re willing to do whatever is required by this duty. By the duties that are inherent in the Four Noble Truths, we really want to master these skills. So you want to be more skillful in comprehending suffering, more skillful in letting go of the cause, and learning to make that distinction. All too often we want to just let go of the suffering. But it doesn’t work that way. We have to figure out what’s causing this, and then you can stop it. It’s like coming into your house and discovering that it’s flooded. A pipe has burst. You can’t stop the flood just by stomping on the water. You have to go and find out where the broken pipe is, how you turn it off, and then the floodwaters will go down. So as you look at whatever dis-ease there is in the mind, you’re looking to seek out what exactly is causing this, what activities are you doing, to keep that sense of dis-ease. Sometimes the dis-ease is very, very subtle, especially when you’re dealing with subtle states of concentration. But it is an activity. It’s a repeated activity. This is what it means to hold on. This is one of the unfortunate sides of the English language. We talk about holding on to something with the mind. Of course, the mind doesn’t have hands to grasp things, but it’s way of holding on is to stick with a particular activity, stick with thinking a particular thought, and catching ourselves doing it, is what this is all about. The basic question is, “What am I doing?” And as you go through the practice, the tone of voice with which you ask that question begins to change. “What am I doing?” You begin to see that there’s a lot of harm caused by the way you really relate to things, the way you think about things, the way you breathe, all the fabrications that the Buddha points out that develop out of ignorance. Bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, directed thought and evaluation, mental fabrication, perceptions and feelings. These are all things that we’re doing, and if we’re doing them in ignorance, they’re going to cause stress. So this is what you want to look for. How are you doing these things? Can you do them more skillfully? Can you do them with more knowledge, with more awareness, to see what kinds of breathing and what kinds of verbal and mental fabrications actually can be developed to form the path? How do you think about the breath and then how do you use that sensitivity to your directed thinking and your evaluation in other areas of life? How do you use it to develop a sense of goodwill for yourself and for the people around you? It’s part of right resolve. How do you use it to analyze the problem of suffering? How do you use it to analyze what’s going on in your mind in states of concentration? We want to look more and more carefully at what we’re doing in light of this practice. What’s adding to the stress in the mind, and what’s helping to relieve the stress in the mind? When you catch the activities that are leading in either way, that’s the beginning of comprehending stress and suffering. You can pinpoint exactly what it is that’s causing that particular type of suffering, that particular type of stress, and you learn how to deal with it. You learn how to let go and learn how to stop doing it. You realize there’s an alternative. You don’t have to keep hitting yourself over the head all the time. It’s like the person going to the doctor. He’s got a hammer in one hand and he’s hammering his thumb on the other hand. He says, “Doctor, doctor, why is my thumb hurting?” This is the kind of stress, this is the kind of suffering, that the Buddha wants us to look into. Where we really can make a difference. And fortunately, it’s the one that really matters. So the ignorance we’re trying to overcome is a lack of skill. So you’re trying to be more skillful in developing mindfulness, concentration, discernment, more skillful in understanding exactly what it is that the Buddha’s talking about when he talks about stress and suffering. Where can you track it down? Where can you see it? How can you watch it steadily? This is where the concentration becomes so important. You need the nourishment of concentration to have the strength that enables you to sit with whatever pain or stress or suffering is in the mind and not allow the ignorance desire for it to go away, to get in the way of actually comprehending it. It requires patience, and the patience requires strength, and the strength requires nourishment. This is where we do the concentration. It allows us to be still enough to see what’s going on. It gives us a sense of well-being that allows us to stick with this question of suffering. And in developing the concentration, you’re gaining practical, hands-on knowledge with this issue of fabrication. So this is where you want to focus your efforts, as the Buddha once said. He once reduced the Eightfold Path to basically right concentration plus its seven requisites, the things that help make concentration right. And remember, this was also the first of the factors of the path that he discovered. So this is why the emphasis is on sitting and concentration. In John Lee’s comparisons, like building a bridge over a river, he said there are three main posts for the bridge. The posts on this side, the posts on the other side, and the posts in the middle. And the posts on this side and the other side, virtue and discernment, he said, are not all that difficult. It’s the ones in the middle that require a lot of continual effort and a lot of your powers of observation. Otherwise, you just get carried away in the normal floods of the mind. So bring as much care and precision as you can to this process of getting the mind to settle down, focused on the breath that helps have a sense of singleness of preoccupation, which means both that you have one focal point, but also that the breath fills your range of awareness. There’s a sense of oneness throughout the body. The breath channels, the breath energies, all connect. They all nourish one another. Think of everything inside connecting up in a nourishing way. Then see what you can do to maintain that. Because that plays a huge role in developing the skills that we’re trying to master.

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