Effort in Time

January 31, 2011

That’s the story they tell. I don’t know whether it comes from the canon or the commentaries of a man who dies, and his death is reported to the Buddha. The Buddha said, “You know, if he had actually put an effort into the practice, he could have become a noble disciple.” But he fritted away his time and found excuses for not practicing. And as a result, he missed his chance. Think of that story. I remember one of Ajahn Mahaprabhu’s teachings that sticks in my mind. The one where he says, “Don’t face death with the thought, ‘Oh, I could have put more effort into the practice.’” Because that’s a thought that would pull you down at that point. A sense of disappointment, a sense of having really not taken care of yourself, not looked after yourself, not made the most of your opportunities. What this translates into, of course, is every time you feel tempted to stop meditating, ask yourself, “Can I do a little more? Why can’t I do a little more?” When drowsiness comes on, ask yourself, “Can I fight the drowsiness?” When laziness comes on, ask yourself, “Can I fight the laziness?” In other words, you don’t just give in to these things. After all, it is through effort that we put an end to suffering. Hridyena dukkham aceti. We hear, but we don’t really want to hear it. So it goes over us, goes past us. And we tend to prefer those teachings that say, “Well, everything is already done. All you have to do is just realize that you’re already awakened or that there’s nothing to do.” Those teachings appeal to us. There’s even a teaching that right mindfulness is a separate practice from right effort. And the right mindfulness is actually the superior teaching. There’s absolutely no basis for this at all. There is an ultimate stage in the practice where all you do is just watch and let go. But to get there requires a lot of effort. Mindfulness, of course, is not just an open, accepting mind state. That picture of mindfulness as being non-reactive is probably based on the idea that we’re spectators of our experience, that we tend to react to the experience. And the reaction is what keeps us bound, causes suffering. If we learned how not to react, then whatever came up would be okay. And we’d be okay. That teaching you sometimes hear, where the Buddha claimed to teach only one thing, suffering and the end of suffering. And they say, “It’s not two things, it’s one. It’s learning how to accept suffering. That puts an end to suffering.” Well, that’s not what the Buddha taught. He taught there was a path to the end of suffering and there was an end of suffering. And there are different truths from suffering and its cause, different duties appropriate to the truths. And mindfulness is part of the path, something you develop. The Buddha had a very different picture of how we experience reality. If you look at dependent core arising, you see a lot of the factors come prior to sensory contact. And these are all the ones that are causing the trouble, or these are the ones who set trouble into motion. The reason we feel craving for sensory contact or respond to sensory contact with craving is because we’ve already set ourselves up through the way we fabricate our experience or the way our intentions mold things and our attention directs things. All those factors in fabrication and name and form come prior even to sensory experience. And the reason we need mindfulness is to remind ourselves that we have other duties. There are duties that we have to fulfill as we approach experience. And that the real causes of suffering lie inside. These are things we have to remember. For instance, with right effort we have to remember that we have to generate desire to engage in right effort. We have to remember that there are different kinds of right effort, getting rid of or abandoning unskillful states that are already there. Preventing unskillful states that are not there yet from arising. Giving rise to unskillful states that aren’t there yet and then maintaining them once they’re put into place. Developing them, bringing them to the culmination of their development. You have to keep that in mind. There are these four different duties. And you have to keep in mind the fact that you have to look at what kind of effort you’re capable of right now and what kind of effort this particular problem requires. So right mindfulness is very intimately connected with right effort. It’s the quality of ardency that the Buddha talks about in the formula for right mindfulness. And so if we find that the desire to engage in right effort is not there, we have to learn how to give rise to it. The Buddha recommends sometimes developing thoughts of heedfulness or developing contemplations that give rise to heedfulness. A lot of these have to do with recollection of death. Sometimes he recommends trying a sense of shame and compunction. This is the kind of shame that goes along with pride. Remember that the path is a skill. It’s the highest skill there is, and there’s a pride and craftsmanship that can go with that. This actually helps develop the path. Not so much pride in that you’re better than other people, simply that you do things well. You take satisfaction in a job well done. As the Buddha told Rahula, when you see that you’ve done something skillfully, take joy in the fact, and use that as encouragement to keep on training. Then as you’re getting more and more skilled, then you do the right thing. You develop a sense of shame over doing something sloppily, something poorly. A sense of compunction, realizing that if you do something sloppily, there are going to be bad results down the line. You just don’t want to go there. It’s a kind of fear, but it’s a healthy kind of fear. Or you can encourage yourself with compassion. Realizing that as you practice, you’re less of a burden on other people. And if your practice really goes far, then the support that other people give to you is going to reap large rewards for them. This is one of the Buddhist ways of encouraging us to try to go all the way, as far as we can go. So there are lots of ways that we can generate desire for ourselves. So if you see your energy is lacking, what can you do to give rise to more energy? If you’ve got the energy but you’re lazy, what can you do to overcome that laziness? Because it’s so easy to look at a situation and find a reason in that situation to be lazy. There’s a whole series of reasons the Buddha points out for why people are lazy and why people are diligent. And the externals are all the same. In fact, there’s a certain kind of humor in the passage, because in each case, in the same external situations, one person says, “Oh, I’ve just recovered from illness. I really don’t have any strength. I’d better rest up a bit.” Or another person, recovering from illness, realizes, “Okay, I’m stronger now than I was before, and who knows if that illness is going to come back, so I’d better practice while I can.” In fact, this element of humor is very important. In dealing with your unskillful thoughts, if you can recognize, “Oh, I’ve seen this character before, and he’s fooled me many times before,” and if you can laugh at that way of thinking, that helps to protect you from it, from falling from it. So there are lots of ways the Buddha has you generate desire. Whatever you find gives you encouragement, gives you the get-up energy, gives you the step-and-go to put more effort into the practice, to be more dedicated to the practice. So you don’t reach that point at death when you realize, “Gosh, I could have put more effort into the practice, but I fritted it away with all kinds of useless things.” Right now, time seems to be abundant. But at that moment, when time runs out, you’re going to regret this unskillful thing. You’re going to regret the things you did, the opportunities for goodness that you missed. So realize that this practice of developing right mindfulness is built on right effort, and includes right effort, and brings us to right concentration. There’s work to be done, good qualities to develop, unskillful qualities to let go. And try to give yourself to that effort as much as you can.

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