Sanghanussati

March 4, 2011

We practice because we’ve seen the example of other people practicing. We read the Dharma, and it makes sense. We understand that a lot of our suffering, a lot of the stress in our lives, comes from within the mind. And if we can train the mind, then we can relieve a lot of that suffering. This conviction gets even stronger when we’ve seen other people who’ve gone far in the path, people who have been able to let go of some of their defilements, or all their defilements. It’s an inspiring example. I remember when I first read about Arahants in Buddhism class. I was a little dubious. What could a person be like without any greed, anger, and delusion? Wouldn’t they be just totally dull and lifeless? Then I met the example of Ajahn Phuong, and the example of many of the other Ajahns in Thailand. I realized that, no, that was not the case at all. The practice trained people to be lively and inquisitive. It trained people to have a good, strong fighting spirit. This is what Ajahn Mahaprabhu exemplified more than anybody else I’d ever encountered. You read his Dharma, you see the example of his life, and he showed that the practice may take a lot of effort, but it’s really worth it. It meant that there would be times when I’d feel a bit overwhelmed and overwhelmed by everything that I had to do in the practice. And that little voice that would sneak in and say, “Well, maybe you’re pushing yourself too hard.” But then you’d see the example of his practice in his life, and you’d say, “Well, no, he pushed himself harder.” And it’s good to have that example, even though he’s passed away now. Still, his example is there, as someone in the modern age who was able to fight off his defilements. It’s good to keep that example in mind. It’s a type of sankhan, a recollection of the Sangha. Stir up your fighting spirit when it gets slack. Because, as he said one time, you don’t want to have to look back on your life and see, “If I’d only put a little bit more effort into the practice, I’d be a lot better off now.” You don’t want to have that regret. So while you have the strength, while you have the energy and the ability, focus it on this issue of suffering and what you’re doing that’s causing suffering, and what you can do to put an end to that suffering. That’s the big issue in life. And then you do whatever is required. One of the very first books that came out as a John Mahaprabhu apprentice was a dharma talk he gave at a commemoration for a John Munn. He pointed out that this was one of a John Munn’s favorite themes, “Practicing the dharma in accordance with the dharma.” In other words, not in accordance with your preferences, or in accordance with your laziness, or in accordance with whatever other presuppositions come up. Whatever the dharma demands, you’re willing to do that, whatever it demands in terms of generosity, virtue, concentration, discernment. Whatever effort is required, you learn to stir yourself to fulfill those requirements, to be up for the fight, to be up for the task. Whether it requires a lot of strength or just very refined attention, you want to be up for whatever is required. You can’t map things out ahead of time, saying, “Well, I prefer to have the path that’s just letting go, or the path that’s just the gentle path.” The Buddha says that there are four kinds of practice—pleasant and quick, pleasant and slow, painful and quick, painful and slow. As he said, you may want the pleasant and quick, but you can’t determine beforehand what’s going to work for you. You have to look at your life. You see that you’re taking it easy in terms of the number of hours you put into practice, the amount of food you take, the amount of sleep. If your definements are still strong, it means you have to push yourself more. You don’t push yourself just for the sake of pushing yourself. If you find that you can live fairly comfortably and you’re able to work on the practice, that’s fine. But if you find that it’s not working, you’ve got to push yourself more. That old phrase, “The great way is not hard for those without preferences,” makes sense only if you think of it in this way. That is, you do whatever is required. If the path requires heavy effort, you put it in. If your definements require a lot of effort, you put it in. Realize that it’s not going to be requiring heavy effort all the time. There will come resting spots in the practice. As the John Mahaprabhu used to say, “It’s not that the practice there is an executioner waiting to kill off your happiness. It’s just that you have to learn how to take a very jauntous side to your definements, particularly to your laziness, because laziness is clever. It has all kinds of dharma arguments. Don’t push yourself too hard. Remember, this is the middle way.” John Mahaprabhu had a great comment on that. He said, “For most of us, the middle way is right in the middle of the pillow, right in the middle of our sleeping pad. That’s the middle way of the definements.” The actual middle way is the middle way that’s appropriate for whatever the task requires, which sometimes may be gentle effort and other times may be requiring strong effort. The only way you’re going to know is if you’re willing to put in some strong effort to see how it goes, see if it works. If the gentle effort doesn’t work well, you put in more effort. You want to make sure, of course, that you’re putting in the right kind of effort. There’s an analogy the Buddha has of trying to get milk out of a cow. You’re doing it by trying to twist the horn. You twist the horn a little bit, and no milk comes out. You twist it more and more and more, and no milk comes out, and the cow starts getting upset. That’s when you have to back off and ask yourself, “Am I really putting in the right kind of effort?” You try twisting and pulling on other parts of the cow’s body, and you finally get to the udder. If the cow hasn’t gotten upset in the meantime, you pull on the udder, and the milk comes out. So first you want to make sure your effort is right. And when you find that it is right, okay, the amount of effort you put in is going to depend on both your level of strength right now and what’s really required by that particular definement. Which means that if your strength is not up for that particular fight yet, you try to knock it out, give it a karate chop until you know you can’t beat that definement at that particular time. But at least you try to fend it off and wait until your strength is gathered and strong, so you really can work your way around it. So while I used to like to say this, a passage of the Buddha says it’s through effort that’s suffering is overcome. We don’t like to hear this. We like to think that it’s through relaxation, through just simply letting go, allowing things to be. But it requires effort. It requires your ingenuity. It requires your discernment. It may require a lot of sacrifices that you don’t want to make, but you have to decide what you really want out of life. You have to make your priorities clear. Remember, this is a trade. When you trade, you have to be willing to give something up. You can’t just take, take, take, take, take, and hoard, hoard, hoard. But you want to make sure that the trade is good. There was a monk in Bangkok who was an expert on Buddha images. The problem was that as he got older, his eyesight began to fail him, and his powers of perception were not as sharp as they had been. When people came to sell him Buddha images that were not genuine, they had learned how to make them look old, and to a really practiced eye, he could have told the difference, but his eyes, as I said, were failing him. He was convinced that he was an expert, and so he would trade good images for old images. He built this one building to be a museum to all the images he collected, but by the time the collection was done, it was worthless. He made all the wrong trades. And that’s what we do in our lives. We make trades all the time. We rarely think about it. Do you allow yourself to spend a lot of time thinking about sensual pleasures? Okay, you’ve just traded the opportunity that could have gone to meditation for something else, for something lesser. So remember, you’re making trades all the time. So try to make the trades intelligent. Trade things of lesser value for greater value. Realize that there are a lot of things you’ll have to give up, but if it’s giving them up in a wise way, you’re going to get a lot in return. So there are hardships on the path. Be prepared for them. As the Buddha said, sometimes there are times when tears are coming out of your eyes and running down your cheeks because it’s so hard, but, he says, you don’t give up, because the rewards of the practice are so much greater. The noble disciples have gone before us and they’ve proven that this is true. So when you find it inspiring, keep their example in mind, so that someday you can be a noble disciple as well, and provide an example and an inspiration for others. This is how the Dharma is kept alive.

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