Whether You Like It or Not

November 28, 2011

There’s that old saying that anything worth doing is worth doing well, which is partly true. Some things are more worth doing than others, which means they deserve more of your attention. Like training the mind, that should have top priority. There are a lot of things out there that can take a lot of time, a lot of energy, and they’re worth doing. But if you focus too much time on doing those things, the mind gets pushed off to the side. So it’s important that you have that sense of priorities. That everything you want to do has to be an issue of training the mind, one way or another. Of course, this doesn’t mean just sitting here with your eyes closed. There are a lot of other areas in life where you have to train your mind to be meticulous, to take care, and to be willing to stretch yourself. If you limit yourself just to the things that you like doing, or you know that you do well, and run away from everything else, that’s not training the mind. You have to be willing to take on things that you don’t like to do, or things that you know you don’t do well or don’t come easily, both outside and inside. For instance, if concentration doesn’t come easily, that means you’ve really got to work at it. And if you don’t have that tendency of being willing to struggle with something you don’t already do well, it’s going to be hard to do it when you meditate. I know when I stayed with the Chandra Purgam, I had a lot of ideas. It’s about how things should be done. And one of the most difficult parts of living with human beings, I found, was having to do what other people want you to do, even though I felt I had some better ideas. Then I ended up being his personal attendant, which meant everything had to be done his way. When he was ill, I had to look after him in the way that he wanted himself looked after. That didn’t come easily. But there was nobody else. Everyone else found a quick opportunity to run away when he was sick, because after all, he had a sharp tongue normally, and it was very sharp when he was sick. And the other monks had to find excuses. This had to be done, that had to be done, and I was left looking after him alone. And it wasn’t easy. But I look back on it now, and it’s probably one of the best parts of my training. Learning how to give myself to something I knew I wasn’t doing well and try to figure out, well, how do you do it better? So you want to look at the areas in your life around you, at the monastery, the things that you tend to avoid, that need to be done. Other things you tend to just slough off and say, “Well, it doesn’t really matter.” That kind of habit goes deep into the mind. Sometimes we like to think that the skills we develop and the things that we do well will translate into skills in the meditation. And that is true. But also our willingness to do things that we normally don’t do well and learn how to do them better, being willing to take the time, take the effort, to go against the grain. That’s going to translate into a lot of important things in your meditation also. Because a lot of the meditation involves looking at parts of your mind you don’t like to look at, the areas where you’re less than honest with yourself, the areas that you tend to cover up. And it’s possible to get into very strong states of concentration and cover up a lot of things if that’s already your habit. So you want to change your habits. Look at the things that you need to do around the monastery, the things that need to be done. And regardless of whether you like to do them or not, if you see something needs to be done, do it. It’s part of what they call volunteer spirit. And think of it all as training for the mind. Because if you can’t deal with things on the external level that you don’t like, then how are you going to look at your own greed, aversion, and delusion? How are you going to look at your own pride? And learn how to get around it so it’s not standing in the way. There’s that old Zen saying that the great way is not difficult for those with no preferences. And a lot of people think that it means, well, you just learn how to accept whatever comes up and be okay with it. But I don’t think that’s what it means. I think it means that you don’t let your preferences get in the way. You see that something needs to be done, you do it, whether you like to do it or don’t like to do it. That way you don’t create any unnecessary difficulties for yourself. So this is not just a practice of accepting things as they are, which often means abandoning responsibility for things. You don’t want to get involved. You don’t want to take on that responsibility. So you paint it over as acceptance, and then you make it the height of the practice. I was reading the other day someone talking about what he said were the undisputed principles of the Four Noble Truths. For him, the cessation of suffering was just learning how to accept things as they are, be with things as they are. That was supposed to be the end of suffering. Well, it’s actually just one part of the path. Developing that kind of equanimity is one of the skills you’re going to need, but you’re going to need a lot of other skills as well. One of them is so basic that we tend to forget about it. Uttanasamvada. You translate it into normal, everyday English. It’s your “get up and go” spirit. Seeing that things need to be done, things need to be dealt with, there are problems that have to be solved, and stirring up the energy to solve them. That underlies the whole path. If you look at the Buddha, he was not just sitting around accepting things. He saw the dangers in life. There’s aging, there’s illness and death, and there’s nothing really nice about these things at all. Sometimes you hear them described as the dance of life, and you have to learn how to dance whatever role is assigned to you and see it just as a big show. Well, it’s not that. It can hurt an awful lot. Just this evening I was talking to two people who’ve lost their partners. And as one of them said, “Grieving is no fun.” And he’s been exposed to a lot of the teachings that say you’ll learn how to see the wonderful process of going through this. He said, “It’s not wonderful. It’s hard.” And the Buddha saw this. A long time ago, aging, illness, and death bring a lot of suffering. And instead of trying to paint it over as being part of some larger, wonderful picture, he really looked at it. He really cared about the fact that people are suffering. He was suffering, other people were suffering. There must be something that can be done about this. That’s what really distinguished him. He really cared about the problem. And so this is an attitude we have to bring to the practice. You have to really care. Realize that your thoughts, words, and deeds all make a difference. You’re making a difference every time you act. So make it an important difference. And develop that willingness to see your blind spots as a real problem, the things that you tend to run away from. Those are a real problem. And if you really want the practice to work, you’ve got to look at them and take them on. Otherwise, you just stay in delusion. And as we all know, delusion doesn’t go anywhere good.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2011/111128_Whether_You_Like_It_or_Not.mp3>