Raising Your Standards

June 15, 2012

Everything the Buddha’s teaching focuses on action—what you’re doing, body, speech, mind. Because that’s where the problem is and that’s where the solution is. We had that chant just now in the five recollections. We’re subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation. In other words, so many of the things that we like to depend on—our own body, the love and support of the people around us—we’re going to lose those things. What do we have to depend on? Our own actions. If we want to find happiness, this is where we have to look at what we’re doing right now. Of course, what we’re doing right now, where does that come from? It comes from your mind, the choices you’re making as you go from moment to moment. Some of them you’re conscious of, and a lot of them you’re not conscious of. And some of them you know could be better, and others you think are perfectly fine. One of the things we try to do as we train the mind is to become better observers, more reliable, with higher standards. So the Buddha has us start with something really basic—the way you breathe. You could breathe better. You could breathe in a way that gives a sense of rapture and fullness, ease, throughout the body. So look at the way you breathe. Where in the body is there a potential for a sense of fullness? When you breathe, do you augment that? Do you foster that? Or do you trample all over it? Sometimes in our cartoon notion of how the breath comes in and out of the body, we trample all over everything. We’re not very sensitive. So here’s your chance to look more carefully at your breath, to see what you’re doing. Learn how to feed off the sense of well-being that the breath can provide. We tend to feed in so many other ways, both physically and emotionally, that lead to suffering for ourselves and suffering for other people. But here’s a way to feed that’s healthy. The breath is free. You find a sense of ease and well-being by the way you breathe. You’re not taking anything away from anyone else. It’s totally blameless, totally harmless. And it’s right there. What did John Fung used to call the grass at the corral? The cows, when they’re let out of the corral, go running right past the gate, looking for grass far away. And there’s grass right there at the gate, but they don’t see it. It’s something that’s easy, something that’s right there, but we tend to overlook it. So let’s focus some attention on the breath. The breath, on the one hand, is a mirror for the mind, and also it’s a great place to see the intentions of the mind moving out into your speech and into your bodily actions. To speak, you need the breath. To move the body, you need the breath. So everything has to go through here. This way you catch yourself as you do things and say things that you might not have really paid attention to before. The other advantage of settling down with the breath is that the mind gets, as the mind gets more quiet, you can see things more clearly—the movements of the mind itself and also what you’re doing—and also see the results of your actions. One of the signs that your meditation is getting better is that you begin to realize that you’re acting in an unskillful way. Things that you used to think were perfectly normal, perfectly okay, you begin to see that they actually do cause unnecessary stress for yourself, for other people, because you’re getting more sensitive. Some people turn away right here. They don’t like to be told this. They don’t like to see this in their own behavior. Yet if you’re going to make any progress in training the mind, if you have any hope for putting an end to the unnecessary stress and suffering you’re causing yourself and other people, you’ve got to learn how to see where your actions are not skillful—things that you thought were perfectly okay. This is one of the reasons why the rules for the monks are so detailed, even down to little things like how you care for your robes, how you care for your bowl. That’s to make you more sensitive to the fact that you may have been treating your things in a careless way. Remember John Fung talking about his time with Ajahn Mun and how Ajahn Mun would take rags and sew them together to make the foot wiping cloths. They were treated very well and washed very carefully. He wouldn’t let anything go to waste. I used to think of myself as a frugal person. When I first heard about Ajahn Mun’s way of dealing with things, it struck me as a little extreme. But the more I got to know him, the more I got to live this life, being in the practice, I began to realize that the little things really do matter. You get meticulous about the little things. You get more sensitive to what you’re doing than the things around you. This is the kind of sensitivity training that you would get in the Dhamma, not so much trying to figure out what your feelings are, but trying to figure out what are your actions and what are the results of your actions. And where could you cause less trouble? In other words, you’re accepting responsibility for areas where you really should be responsible. And so when you run up against the precepts or you run up against your own defilements, you have an opportunity to raise your standards. And the precepts are challenging. When you make a vow not to kill anything, all of a sudden you realize that there’s a lot of careless killing that you took as perfectly normal. And you’ve got to figure out, “Well, how can I live in such a way that I can still be comfortable and yet not kill in any way, shape, or form anything that you can see?” When you run up against your defilements, areas where there’s greed that you hadn’t noticed before, or anger that you hadn’t noticed before, take it as an opportunity to raise your standards and say, “Okay, here’s an opportunity to grow, to try to figure out what’s a more skillful way of acting in these situations.” Just that principle right there covers a huge amount of territory. It covers catching yourself in the course of doing something unskillful and being willing to admit to yourself that you could do it in a better way. And how do we know? Well, if there’s still any stress or suffering in your heart, you know that there’s room for improvement. Now, some people may say that this is blaming the victim. And sometimes you are the victim of other people’s outrageous behavior. But the question of whether you’re going to suffer from that behavior or not, that’s a question of how your mind handles the situation. And so the other person’s behavior may be something that you can change or may not be able to change, but you can change the way you handle things. The way you look at things, you can change your standards as to what’s an acceptable way to act, an acceptable way to speak, an acceptable way to think. We talk about how the Buddhist teachings are pragmatic. They’re all very practical. They’re all aimed at making a difference. Well, that difference is not just learning how to act in a way that you feel comfortable with, but raising your standards of okay. You and the people around you will benefit.

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