Staying Power

July 29, 2012

There are two kinds of skills in the world. The first kind are the skills that we do because we do them well. We find that we have a talent for them, and we keep coming back and back and back to them because we enjoy doing them. We can see the progress, and it’s very rewarding. Right from the start. The other kind of skills are the skills we have to do just in order to survive. We do them regardless of whether we’re good at them or not. We have to develop some expertise. Simple things like washing your clothes, cooking, basic carpentry, sewing. Swimming. Things you need in order to get by in this world. And in some cases we find them really difficult, but we have to stick with them. Training the mind falls into this second category. Some of us may find that certain parts of training the mind, certain aspects of the training, are easy and we do them well. But the whole training of the mind is always going to involve something that we find difficult one way or another. Jon Furon would sometimes have people come and sit and meditate with him. And right from the very start, they’d find it easy for their minds to settle down. They might have a vision or two or something like that. And then they’d leave and never come back. The settling down was easy. The sticking with it was hard. So even with people who have a natural talent for concentration, it’s not always an easy practice. And there’s a lot to the training of the mind that’s not just concentration. Everything from how you move, how you look left and right, all the basic manners of being a person who practices the Dhamma all the way up to the more refined skills of the mind. Given that some of these are going to be hard, the question is how do you stick with them? How do you develop staying power? There are two basic ways. One is to remind yourself of the dangers that come when you don’t practice. These are things you can see all around you. Go to a hospital or an old folks home and watch the people who have not trained their minds. And it’s really dismaying. You can remind yourself that you could be in that situation too. The other way of developing staying power is to learn how to keep your mind in basically a good mood as you practice. And the Buddha has lots of techniques for this. If you’re criticized, as he says, see that as someone who’s pointing out a treasure to you. The fact that someone takes the effort to point out someplace where you’re lacking. If you look at what the person says, you look at yourself, and if you really are lacking there, then you’ve learned something good. You can focus on an area where you might have pushed things away and said, “Well, it’s okay,” or, “It doesn’t matter.” And you begin to see that it really does matter, and you really do have to focus there. So even the criticism is something we don’t like. Learn to view it. View it in a positive way. You’ve had a treasure revealed to you. Another important skill is learning how not to weigh yourself down. I was talking to someone today who’s been engaged in a project for twenty years. He said every time he thought about it, it would get to him that he’d basically been doing this for twenty years almost nonstop. I remember Jon Fuang’s comment to someone who came to him one time and complained that she’d been meditating for three years and her mind didn’t seem to be getting anywhere. He said, “Don’t think that thought. Those three years are not something you want to use to weigh down the present moment. Focus on what you can do right here, right now. Always focus on the opportunities. Always focus on the openings that are provided by whatever situation. You’ve got to learn how to look for those. And if you’re having trouble with something, remind yourself that there have been lots of people who’ve had trouble with the same problem before, but they were able to develop the staying power that enabled them to watch that problem again and again and again until they finally understood it. The more quickly you can pick things up right away, the better. But there are cases where it’s going to take a while. So what matters is your staying power, your ability to stick with it and to keep looking again and again and again, and not give up hope. Find ways of encouraging yourself. Focus on the opportunities rather than the setbacks. Recognize the setbacks. You know that you’ve got your problems. I’ve always found, though, that people can’t admit their problems or that they have areas where they need more work. Those are the ones who don’t last. They can’t help but get to you. Then you can deal with them. Then you find that they don’t get you down. So staying power really means keeping your spirits up, regardless of how difficult things may be. Because, as Ajahn Man kept stressing again and again and again with the students, there’s nothing superhuman about the path. You’ve got everything that’s required. You’ve got a body, you’ve got a mind. All you need is the confidence that these things are enough. Then you have it within your power to test the Buddhist teachings and to benefit from them. So regardless of whether the mind is settling down easily or not, remember, it’s not the ease with which things happen that matters. It’s what you learn from them. Sometimes you learn a lot from mastering a difficult skill, one that doesn’t come easily. This is probably one of the problems in our society. We tend to channel people into areas where they already show talent. As a result, we don’t learn the skills that are needed to master the skills that we don’t have talent for. Those are the skills that are really important. So look within yourself to see what strengths you can build on, what times in the past you’ve faced difficult problems and were able to overcome them. Then you look carefully and you see that one of the key things was learning how not to weigh yourself down unnecessarily. In fact, a lot of the path is just that—seeing where the burdens you’re placing on the mind are not necessary and learning how to let them go. The burdens, of course, are not things, but they’re attitudes you carry around, thoughts you repeat over and over and over again. Learn to see when a thought is burdensome. Learn to see when it’s not helpful. Try to replace it with more helpful ways of thinking. And you find the tasks that seemed insurmountable are not so bad after all. And even if they are hard, you can get over them. You’ve got the strength. You’ve got what’s required. It’s learning how to manage your strengths that will make all the difference.

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