Victory

August 30, 2012

One of Ajaan Foong’s favorite stories was of a poor couple who had only one upper robe between them. That was back in the days. You didn’t go out in public without an upper robe on, which meant that if the wife left the house with the upper robe on, the husband would have to stay at home. If the husband left the house, the wife would have to stay at home. They were that poor. They only had that one piece of cloth for an upper robe. They also had under robes, but that wasn’t enough to go out in public. One night they heard that the Buddha was going to be giving a Dhamma talk. So they decided that the husband would go and listen. The story goes that the Buddha surveyed the crowd and he saw that this man was the one who was going to benefit from the Dhamma talk. He needed a lesson in generosity. That was why they were so poor. They’d never been really generous. So the Buddha gave a talk on the topic of generosity, the rewards of generosity. The man sat there thinking to himself, “This is why we’re so poor. We’ve never been generous. But what do we have? What can we give? All I’ve got is this upper robe. What would we do without that upper robe?” So the talk went on and on. The man was fighting back and forth inside himself. Finally, at midnight, he got up and yelled, “Victory! Victory!” He took his robe and gave it to the Buddha. Now, that was in the days when the only person in the kingdom who was allowed to say victory was the king. The king happened to be sitting in the audience as well. So who’s this shouting victory? Then he found out it was this poor man who had nothing to give but that one cloth. So the king rewarded him with two sets of cloth, two sets of whatever. Two pieces of gold, two pieces of silver, two horses, two cattle, two slaves, whatever. Two of everything. So the man gave that to the Buddha. So the king upped the ante. Four of each. The man gave that. Eight of each. The man gave that to the Buddha. Sixteen. It was at this point that the man decided it was getting kind of late, so he kept eight and gave the remaining eight to the Buddha and went home. And the Buddha later said that if he had gained victory over his defilements earlier in the evening, he would have gotten a lot more than that. But the king was getting tired, so he managed sixteen. So this is the important victory. It’s not so much victory over troops or victory over land, victory over people. It’s victory over your own defilements. That’s what it comes down to. We had that chant on the Buddha’s victories. Even though there are times when the Buddha gained victory over others, the really important one was that victory on the night of his awakening, when he gained victory over his ignorance, victory over all the other unskillful qualities that were the forces of Mara, the armies of Mara. So as you’re sitting here meditating, ask yourself, what is it that you keep giving in to? What is it that you keep losing out to? Wake up your mind that tonight you’re going to have some victory here. And part of the mind will say, “Oh, you know you’re going to go back to your old ways. Don’t even bother.” Well, that’s the part of the mind that’s the fifth column, that’s sneaking into you and trying to keep you from doing anything special. So even though this victory may not be a permanent victory, at least let’s have a taste of what it feels like not to give in to sleepiness, not to give in to sensual desire, not to give in to ill will, any of the hindrances that tend to overcome you. Because, as the Buddha said, having victory over yourself is much more valuable than victory over thousands of others. Because victory over others or people can turn back into hostility, animosity. That kind of victory doesn’t really end anything. But when you put an end to a particular defilement, even if it’s just temporarily, it creates no hostility at all. Or as the Buddha one time said when he was asked, “What are the cases when you would condone killing?” And he said, “I condone killing of anger.” That, by the way, disproves that theory that was floating around after 9/11, that somehow the Buddha would condone state violence simply because he never spoke out against it when the king came to visit him. But the only thing the Buddha would condone killing was anger. And the same goes with your other defilements. It’s the defilements you can kill off, no problem. So see what you can do tonight. Try to notice, is there something you keep giving in to? What is your personal addiction that pulls you away from the meditation? One very common problem is that if you know that you have a whole hour to sit and meditate, if you take a nice easy glide down to concentration, you can have a sense of how long it takes to sit here for an hour and you can kind of gradually get into concentration and finally find that in those last five minutes the mind has really settled down. And then it’s such a shame that the bell rings and that’s the end of the session. What would happen if you decided to go down and settle down right now? You know where your spot is. You’ve been meditating long enough. Where is the spot where the mind feels most secure, where it feels most at ease? What kind of breathing feels really good? You can create that. And are you afraid that if the mind settles down right now you won’t know what to do with yourself? Well, just settle it down and then just keep it there. Make that the skill that you want to develop tonight. In other words, take notice of the tricks your mind plays on itself. We’ve gotten into certain habitual patterns. They may not seem particularly bad, but they’re not especially good, and they certainly don’t encourage growth in the practice. See what you can do to win out over those as well. Right here is the victory that really matters. Even though you may lose what you win tonight, the next time you sit, well, try again. Try again. There comes a point though where you really do win out. Everything clicks inside. And you see a defilement fall away and it doesn’t come back. That’s the kind of victory that really goes straight to the heart. It makes you realize that what the Buddha taught is really true. It is possible to put an end to the sufferings that you create for yourself. And it’s something you can do regardless of whether you’re male, female, ordained, not ordained, whatever. This is part of our human capability.

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