Helping Others, Helping Yourself

August 8, 2013

The Granite Giants keep making the point that the practice is something you do in all postures. Sitting, standing, walking, lying down. It’s not just for when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. The mind is always moving, and its movements always need to be trained. And the good qualities you develop as you’re sitting, standing, walking, lying down out in the world help the times when you’re doing formal meditation. And the good qualities you develop in formal meditation help the practice out in the world. There’s no clear line separating them, because, after all, it’s the same mind giving the orders. When we work around the monastery, we try to be very careful, very precise in what we do. We try to do our best, take care of each job appropriately, figure out which jobs are really important to do very, very carefully, and which ones you can do just enough to get by. But using your discernment and being very mindful in what you do, that, of course, is going to help your meditation. And as you meditate, you get more observant about what your mind is doing as it’s just sitting here, focusing on the breath and those little blips of movement going here and there. You see those clearly. And you notice what kind of ways of breathing accomplish that. They accompany the arising of greed, they accompany the arising of anger, delusion, fear, whatever the unskillful emotion. And when you get sensitive to those things here, then you’re more likely to be sensitive to them when you’re out walking around, dealing with other people. The Buddha gives the image of a pair of acrobats. The chief acrobat gets up on the end of a bamboo pole, and he has his assistant get up on his shoulders. And in the story the Buddha tells, the chief acrobat says, “You look out after me, and I’ll look out after you, and we’ll be able to perform our tricks and then come down safely from the bamboo pole and get our reward.” And his assistant says, “No, that’s not going to work. I have to look after myself, and you look after yourself, and in that way we’ll be able to perform our tricks, come down safely from the pole, and get our reward.” The Buddha said in that case what the assistant said was right, because after all, when you’re an acrobat, you have to look after your own balance. No one else can look after your balance for you. But the Buddha doesn’t stop there. He doesn’t say simply that looking after yourself takes care of the whole situation in every case. There are other cases, he says, where looking out after other people is looking out after yourself when you develop certain qualities in your interactions. And this is the important part. There are four qualities that he lists—goodwill, empathy, endurance, and harmlessness. The goodwill, the empathy, and the harmlessness go together. Goodwill is wishing other people well, not having any ill will for anybody. In other words, you don’t harbor in your mind thoughts of how much you would like to see so-and-so. You realize that even people who’ve done a lot of evil, the world would be a much better place if they could see the wrong that they’ve been doing and learn how not to do it anymore. This is not a judgmental thought. I’ve heard a number of people say that. They say that saying that other people have behaved wrongly is a horrible, judgmental thing. Well, it’s not. You recognize there is such a thing as good behavior and bad behavior. And you realize there are some people who are behaving really badly. Because if you can’t recognize bad behavior in other people, how are you going to recognize it in yourself? But you still don’t have any ill will for those people. You hope that they change their ways and actively try to find the causes for true happiness, act on those causes, and experience the true happiness. That’s the attitude you want to have as you deal with everybody. Empathy means looking at what they want and having sympathy for their desires for happiness. You’re trying to put yourself in their shoes. And harmlessness, of course, means that you’re not going to do or say anything that’s going to do real harm to them. Here you have to make the distinctions between what is harmful and what simply hurts their feelings. And real harm, of course, deals with the precepts. It deals with being a bad example to other people in terms of not being generous, not being virtuous, acting in ways that show you don’t really think that your actions really matter. That’s harmful to yourself, of course, but it’s also harmful to others because you’re setting a bad example. And finally, there’s endurance. You put up with a lot of difficult things when you deal with other people, and the quality of endurance is something that’s really important to developing your own mind. Otherwise, you won’t be able to face the difficult patches that you go through in the practice. There are times when it’s really hard to sit down and meditate. There are other times when it’s easy. And if you meditate only when you feel like it or only when it’s easy, you’re never going to get the mind developed. You’re never going to deal with your defilements and overcome them, because they’ll just put up that little wall, “I don’t feel like it right now. I’m lazy.” Or maybe not be quite so honest about the fact that they’re lazy, but just say, “Well, I’m too tired right now.” There’s that standard list, “It’s too early,” “It’s too late,” “It’s too hot,” “It’s too cold,” “I’m too hungry,” “I’m too full.” The mind can come up with all sorts of ways to tell itself that it doesn’t want to practice and it’s not in good shape for practice. You’ve got to practice whether you feel in good shape or not. This is what endurance is about. You find that there are resources of strength within you that you might not have recognized otherwise when you are determined that you’re really going to stick with it. If you don’t have that determination, you’ll never tap into those resources. You can see that the line between developing your own mind and the line between interacting well with other people is really blurry. When you develop mindfulness, this is where the Buddha says developing yourself or helping yourself helps others, when you work on mindfulness practice. Keep in mind that whatever comes into your mind, you want to notice it and you want to be able to judge it as whether it’s skillful or not. If it’s not skillful, you want to be able to abandon it. If it’s skillful, you want to work on it. This is the duty of mindfulness. It’s a duty that’s so often misunderstood in our culture. Mindfulness has become the buzzword for just passively accepting things, being non-reactive. The whole reason mindfulness was used in transcendental translation was because it relates to being mindful, keeping something in mind. In this case, it’s keeping in mind the fact that you want to work on your skillful qualities and get rid of your unskillful ones. And of course, as you do that, there’s less unskillful garbage to throw around to other people. One of the Four Stojans has the image that if you’ve got a lot of mud in your mind, you’d like to cast it on others. But if there’s no mud there, your interactions with other people are clean. You don’t impose any mud on them. So make sure that you don’t draw a clear, hard-and-fast line between your practice of meditation and your practice of truth. You’re training the mind in your interactions with other people. The qualities you develop there are the ones you need here. The qualities you develop here are the ones that help there. Because it’s all the same mind, and the habits it has in one area are going to affect its habits in another one. So see this as a 24/7 training. Or, as Ajahn Fuang said, make it akaliko, make it timeless. All your times of the day are times to train the mind. That’s when the practice develops momentum, and that’s how it can grow.

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