The Dignity of Right Effort

July 30, 2014

Take some good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. And whatever else may be going on in your mind right now, make sure that at least part of the mind is here with the breath—the sensation of coming in, going out, soothing the whole course of your body. We need as much help as we can. So try to get the help that the breath has to offer. The Buddha compares contact at the senses to a cow that’s been flailed. It’s missing its skin, and bugs or flies are coming at it from all directions. That’s how the mind is assailed all the time, by sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, thoughts—thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future—that can come and bite at any time. So what are you going to do? You’ve got to give the mind a good place to stay, a good place to gain its strength. The present moment is not necessarily the present moment. It’s not necessarily a wonderful moment, but it does have its potentials. And you want to take advantage of those, because you need strength to deal with what life has to offer and at the same time not create more problems. Remember that we’re not just on the receiving end of things, but we’re also on the creative end. Our thoughts, words, and deeds are creating karma. That requires a double level of strength. So you’re not just learning how to cope with difficult things, but you’re learning how to cope very skillfully so that you don’t create more difficulties for yourself or for other beings. That takes a certain level of dignity, which is a word that’s missing all too much in our culture. I think I’ve told you about the time I was giving a Dhamma talk to a group of people up in Orange County, and there was a Russian emigre who’d been in the States for about ten years or so. And after the talk, I’d mentioned dignity in the talk, and she came up and said that was the first time she’d heard the word “mentioned” in America, which is a sad commentary on our culture. She’d learned it in English class when she was in Russia, but it wasn’t here. Nobody talked about it. And yet it’s an important quality that should inform our practice, after a look at the Buddha. He wanted to find a happiness that was totally harmless. And even though his mind or heart didn’t leap up at all the things that had to be done in the path, he was determined that whatever had to be done in the path, he was going to do it. He once talked about how the time he realized that if he was going to get any progress at all, he had to bring his mind to concentration. But that was going to mean putting aside his passion for something more than sensuality. And this is that his heart didn’t leap up. But something inside him realized, “Look, this is what you’ve got to do.” And so he was able to talk himself into doing it. And so he went up through the various levels of concentration. He went up through the stage of abandoning even the pleasures of concentration. And it was in that way that he found something really higher. Something more reliable. A happiness that was truly harmless, greater than any other happiness he’d experienced. So the path asks that we develop this quality of dignity as well, realizing that our emotions are going to be pulling in all kinds of directions as we practice, but we can’t give in to them. Because there is a sense of well-being that comes from doing what you know should be done and appreciating it. There was a German poet, Schiller, who made a distinction between grace and dignity in doing the right thing. Grace is when you know what’s the right thing to do and you feel like doing it. Your emotions, everything inside you says, “Yeah, this is something I really want to do.” There was no internal struggle. You do those actions with grace. There are other times when you know that the proper thing to do is, but your emotions are pulling in another direction. And it’s your ability to stick with what you know is right. That’s dignity. It requires effort. It requires all your intelligence, both your thinking intelligence and your heart intelligence. But there is a part of your heart that knows that this is right, and it’s going to get nourished the more you make the decisions that require dignity. So this is a quality that’s really important in the path. You see this in all the ajahns. You see this in the example of the Buddha and the noble disciples that we read about in the Pali Canon. They faced hard choices. We tend to forget this sometimes when we read about it, especially in the hagiographies of the ajahns, where it sounds like they were ready to be arahants as soon as they sprang out of the womb. You have to remember that that’s a particular genre. It’s a particular style of writing. It’s meant to inspire. It’s meant to do honor. But then sometimes when it gets discouraging, when it makes all the difficult things that it did sound easy, and you know that they’re not easy for you, well, they weren’t easy for them either. As John Flynn once told about the turmoil he went through, he said, he went through trying to decide whether he wanted to be a forest monk or not, realizing that life as a forest monk is not an easy life. He actually went on an experimental time into the forest. It wasn’t easy. But at the same time, he came to the realization of what kind of life he was going to face if he didn’t follow the life of a monk in the forest. As he said, all the escape routes were closed. At least this was a way out. So even though the practice may not be easy, there are times when you have to reflect that not practicing is a lot harder. There’s a story of a monk in the forest who was hearing the people in a nearby village having a festival. He started feeling sorry for himself. They were having fun, and he was out here alone in the forest. His meditation wasn’t going anywhere. This deva suddenly appeared to him and said, “Do you realize how many people out there who envy you this opportunity? At least you’re going in the right direction.” So whatever you can do to encourage yourself when things are getting tough in the practice, knowing that if you make the right choice, you will be happy afterwards. Use your ingenuity to talk yourself into doing the right thing. This is part of what the Buddha calls generating desire. It’s a part of right effort. When you act with dignity in this way, you’re on the path.

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