Dealing with Limitations

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We all come to the practice with limitations. Some of them are physical, some of them are mental. Sometimes we don’t even realize we have those limitations until we actually apply ourselves to the practice and we run into things, limitations we didn’t expect. And the important thing is not to be defeated by them. You’ve got to recognize them. You can’t deny them, but you can’t let them get in the way. You have to find your way around them. The first step is to look at what positive qualities you do have, focus on those, and develop some equanimity around your limitations. They are a blow to your ego, your self-esteem. But just remember, everybody comes with limitations, so you’re not alone. You take the example of the monks and the nuns and the Theragatha and Therigatha. There’s the old woman who had ten children, and she was just totally worn out from raising ten kids. Yet she was able to become an arahant. There’s another woman who had lost her entire family and had actually gone crazy for a while. Upon meeting the Buddha, she was able to come back to her senses to some extent, and then even more to some extent. She, too, became an arahant eventually. There’s a famous arahant who was blind, and on down the list. So you sit down to meditate and find things are not going well, or you’ve got some health problem that makes it difficult to meditate long periods of time. Or sit periods of time. You can meditate in any posture. Remind yourself of that. Sitting, standing, walking, lying down. If you’ve got a physical limitation, remind yourself, “Here’s a lesson.” Some physical limitations come more and more. When disabled people talk about abled people as being the temporal or temporarily abled, they’ve got a point. We’re all going to meet up with times when we’re going to get sick, we’re going to grow old, and we’re going to die. This body is not going to last forever. At the very least, you’ve got your little warning signal here. So don’t let yourself be lazy in the practice. Whatever you may lack in terms of physical capabilities, try to make up for it in terms of your mental determination that you’ve got today. And you’ve got this breath. Stick with it. As for the limitations that come when your mind is all over the place and you can’t seem to get it to settle down, drop the breath for a while and find some good topic to think about. Think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. Think about the times you’ve been generous, the times you’ve been virtuous, i.e., you could have harmed somebody and you didn’t. Think about this body. You’ve got all those thirty-two parts that we chant about again and again and again. Anything that you find that’s a Dhamma topic and your mind can get engaged with it, focus on that. In other words, if you see a limitation in one area, if you see something blocking you in that area, see if you can get around the block, get around the blockade there. Because otherwise, if you get defeated by whatever limitations you have now, it’s like there’s no sign that those limitations will someday go away and then you can come back with an open field before you. You have to take advantage of what you’ve got. Look at where your strengths are. And if you look around and don’t see any strengths, that’s good reason to make sure that you’ve built at least something. John Foreman tells about when he was young. He was orphaned. He wasn’t doing well in school. His relatives had placed him in different monasteries. One of the abbots had tried to teach him music, the old Thai xylophone orchestra. He didn’t have a knack for that. Another monk tried to teach him medicine, but all he could see was that he was going to bed and everybody’s back in call every day. He was a young temple boy. He hadn’t listened that much to the Dhamma. He said he was around sixteen and all of a sudden he actually started listening and realizing he didn’t have much good karma. At least, it wasn’t showing at the time. So he better do whatever he could. That was his attitude all through his life, even when his good karma started kicking in. He would still do whatever he could, even toward the end of his life when we had construction projects in the monastery and he was too weak to actually work on the construction projects. He’d come out every evening and walk around and pick up fallen nails and just look for something. Because everything that’s skillful, everything that’s wholesome, everything that’s involved in generosity, meditation, and the generosity doesn’t have to be material generosity. It can be just being helpful with your time, being helpful with your energy. That’s all good stuff. It all adds up. As the Buddha said, don’t disparage merit. The little bits of merit, the little tiny meritorious acts, he says, are like a jar of water. There are little drops of water falling in again and again. Eventually the jar gets full. So even though we may want the practice to advance really quickly and to show that we already have a lot of talent, you have to remember a lot of the really talented meditators are the ones that the Buddha took with him a long time ago. So we’ve got to scrape together what we’ve got. That way, even though you meet up with limitations, you don’t let them defeat you. You find your way around. So a lot of this is learning how to think about yourself and learning how to think about the practice, and learning how to think in ways that are helpful. We often think of meditation as something where you stop thinking, and there is that aspect to meditation. But to get there, sometimes you have to learn how to train your mind how to think in the proper way, think in a way that’s wholesome. Here, we’re not talking about thinking the way they teach you in school. It’s more thinking looking at your life, looking at yourself, what they call in Pali attanyatah, having a sense of yourself, where your weaknesses are, where your strengths are, accepting your strengths without getting unseated about them, and accepting your weaknesses without getting defeated by them, and learning how to use those strengths to get around the problems of the weaknesses. That kind of thinking is helpful. So when you meet up with a limitation, this is where thinking about equanimity gets helpful. Equanimity comes both from concentration and from discernment. Discernment here doesn’t have to wait for the concentration. When you meet something, you say, “Okay, this is where, at the time being, I can’t exert any energy, I can’t make any difference. So you put it aside. In some cases, you’ll find you’ll be putting it aside for the rest of your life. In other cases that are important, eventually you have to come back at some point. But just realize,”Okay, not now. Not yet. I’m not ready for that.” Victory lies with a person who knows how to train himself, knows what boundaries he can battle if he’s ready for, or she’s ready for. And you don’t take on more than you can handle. You push yourself, but you learn how to push yourself just enough to grow. It’s like any physical exercise. You don’t run a marathon without practice. You build up, build up, build up. And if this year’s marathon you’re not ready for, you push yourself. If you’re ready for it, okay, you wait until the next year. If you try running the marathon when you’re not ready for it, you make a fool of yourself. A lot of kaksara people who actually die have these big signs all over the Grand Canyon. They talk about people who run marathons, people who were athletes and thought they could just go down to the canyon with no problem. Well, they got dehydrated and they died because of their overconfidence. So even though our education system teaches us to have self-esteem, a lot of times it’s just overconfidence, which is not really helpful for anybody at all. The person who comes out victorious is the one who gradually works up, works up, but is steady in his or her application. And so you may want to run the marathon. Run the marathon this year, but if you’re not ready for it, the wise thing is to practice what you can run. That way you develop equanimity in a way that’s really helpful. I mean, equanimity is not there just to not care about things. It’s to be applied selectively. What things can you make a change in, what things can you not? If you can make a change for the good in something, go ahead and apply yourself. If you realize that right now is not yet the time, okay, put it aside for the time being. Work on the things where you can make a change, where you can build up your strength. Because there are various strengths in the practice. The strength that comes from generosity is not just one kind of strength that’s not related to virtue or not related to meditation. They’re all related. As the Buddha said, a person who’s stingy has no hope of getting into the jhanas, much less any higher attainment. So generosity is part of concentration practice. It’s part of discernment practice. It’s the same with virtue. If you can’t have any control over your words and deeds, there’s no way you’re going to have control over your mind. And if you don’t learn the principle of learning how to do without the things that you could gain by breaking the precepts, then you won’t have any practice in learning how to say “no” to the mind when greed, aversion, and delusion come in really strong, where you’re trying to get the mind to settle down. But if you have that practice, you’ll learn how to say “no” effectively and say “no” in a way where you’re not miserable. You’ll learn how to put up with the difficulties that come with being generous and bringing in interest, and it’s going to be a lot easier to deal with the difficulties that come when you meditate. So these things are all interconnected. They’re all part of the same practice. Don’t let your self-image wanting to go right to the end right away get in the way. Be the sort of person who has a big plan but knows how to approach the big plan step by step by step, in manageable bites, and then learning how to manage larger and larger bites. That’s how any large practice, any large attainment, any large project has to be approached.

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