Shame, Compunction & Ardency

February 24, 2015

We come to the practice because it’s a safe place. It provides a safe place. It provides protection. That’s what the concept of refuge is all about. And the Buddha talks about protection in many, many ways. The teachings on karma are a kind of protection. There’s a very clear sense of wanting what should be done and what shouldn’t be done, what’s skillful and what’s not. As the Buddha once said, if you deny the idea that there are skillful actions, and then skillful actions, if you deny the idea that your actions have any consequences, you’re left without protection. And if you try to influence other people in your same thinking, you’re leaving them without protection, too. Sometimes we have no idea what to do and what not to do. In fact, when it comes down to it, the big thing we have to protect ourselves from is our own unskillfulness in thought, word, and deed. Mindfulness is one of the qualities that protects us, but mindfulness on its own has to be directed by right view. It has to be directed by heedfulness. Another pair of qualities that the Buddha talks about is shame and compunction. Shame is a word that many people don’t like to hear, and compunction is a word we hardly ever hear at all. But as I said, they protect the world, because without a sense of shame—in other words, the feeling that some kind of actions are beneath you—you can do anything. And then you’re left with the result of having done anything. As for compunction, it means the ability to realize that certain actions are going to lead to harm or suffering, and you’re not apathetic about it. Both of these are qualities that really have to be developed. Now, with shame there’s a lot of misunderstanding. It’s because we’ve probably been taught since childhood to be ashamed of many things that are really not shameful. Our race, our appearance, there’s nothing shameful about that. What’s really shameful is if you know something is wrong and you go ahead and do it. And that’s actually a quality of self-esteem, realizing that that kind of action is beneath you. That kind of feeling of shame—the shame that sees that it’s beneath you that you shouldn’t be doing that—that’s something that needs to be cultivated. Because it does develop a sense of well-being, a sense of self-esteem. The kind of shame that’s debilitating, that says, “I’m a horrible person. I don’t want to show my face to anybody. I can’t do anything.” That’s not the kind of shame the Buddha’s recommending. You have to remember when he’s talking to Rahula at the very beginning of the Rahula’s training. They’re both members of the noble warrior class. And the kind of shame that those people feel is the shame that comes from doing something beneath them. So shame has a quality of nobility in it. That’s the kind of shame you want to develop. And part of that training the Buddha gave to Rahula is, when you see that you’ve done something wrong, go talk it over with somebody else. Get their advice. In other words, you’re not ashamed to admit your mistakes. It’s shameful, actually, to not admit your mistakes. It’s also shameful not to be willing to take instruction. If your sense of pride is so brittle that it can’t have room for some instruction or can’t have some room for some criticism, then that’s an unhealthy pride. As for compunction, it’s paired many times in Pali with the word for ardency. The two words are very close. Otapa is compunction. Atapa is ardency. In both cases, they’re motivated by a sense that your actions do have consequences and you have to be very careful. In other words, they both come out of heedfulness. Then you sense that, okay, maybe those actions are going to have a bad effect on somebody else or their immediate life. Maybe they’re going to have a bad effect on me someplace down the line, and I’m not going to brush that off. Because you know that when pain comes, it’s painful. It may not be painful now as you anticipated, but it’s going to be painful down the line. So these are qualities that protect you from doing things that you later regret. Then they relate to something else that’s very important in the practice. A lot of us come to the practice because we want a feeling of peace. But the Buddha also recommends that you come to the practice out of a sense that you want to behave in a moral way, in a virtuous way. One of the reasons why we practice concentration is so that we can get very clear about our intentions. So when an unskillful intention comes up, you know that this is unskillful, and you have the wherewithal to say no. One of Ajahn Mun’s most distinctive teachings was his realization that it’s not the case that you begin with virtue and then go to concentration and then go to discernment. Your discernment and your concentration can help foster your virtue, nurture your virtue. Just as discernment can nurture your concentration, in other words, all three qualities help one another along. One of the reasons we practice concentration is so that our actions can be cleaner. With a sense of clarity that comes from concentration, you see your intentions. With a sense of strength and well-being, a sense of nourishment that comes from your concentration, you can say no to a lot of the things that would tempt you to do something unskillful. So this moral aspect of the practice, this virtuous aspect of the practice, is really very important. Keeping this in mind is one of the ways you can motivate yourself to meditate more. Not just so that you feel better, although that is one of the rewards of meditation, but also so that you can act with more honor in this world. Again, the word honor is something that’s been pushed aside a lot. We hear it mainly in the military. It would be good to have it more in the era of the Dhamma practice, where you really can be honorable in the sense that other people may abuse you, but you don’t abuse people back. Other people may behave in unskillful ways, but you don’t behave in unskillful ways back to them. The concentration can strengthen your sense of honor so that it’s healthy. It really is for your good and for the good of the world.

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