Con Artists (med-fi)

August 1, 2015

There’s a passage in the Canon where the Buddha is still not yet the Buddha. He’s the Bodhisatta, working to gain awakening. And Mara appears to him and takes a friendly, consoling voice. “You poor thing, you’re so thin, you’re so emaciated. You’re almost dead. Why keep on going? Be proud of the fact that you live. If you just die, nothing’s going to happen, nothing’s going to be accomplished. But if you give up the practice, at least you’ll be alive.” Notice that tone of voice, kind of like a con artist coming to act as your friend. That’s the way a lot of the defilements are. They sneak into the mind. They pretend that they’re your friends. You’ve been living with them so long that they’ve become your intimates, people you hang around with very closely, the ones you talk to, the ones you listen to. And you’re such good friends that it’s hard to separate yourself from them. But as the Buddha points out, they’re out to get you. There’s that analogy, five aggregates are coming after you, planning to murder you whenever they can. In other words, your body’s going to leave you, your feelings are going to give you pain. All these things that you identify with, they’re going to give you pain. And then on top of them, there’s a sixth, which is passion and delight, which stands for all the defilements. And it’s an old intimate. Someone used to be really friendly, someone used to be intimate with you, and now they’re after you. Actually, they’ve been after you all the time. So as we meditate, we have to learn how to separate ourselves out from these things. We can’t see them until we see them as something separate, that they really aren’t us. This is why when the Buddha taught breath meditation to his son, he didn’t save the teaching on inconstancy or not-self to the end. It’s one of the preliminary instructions. Anything that comes up is going to take you away from the breath. You have to learn to see as not-self. This is not yours. No matter how much it may seem like you, and no matter how familiar it may be, you’ve got to realize anything that’s going to pull you away from the breath right now is not in your best interest. You have to learn how to separate yourself out. This is why we have to work with the breath, so it’s not just in, out, in, out. It’s not just the meditation we’re doing together with the breath. We have to get the breath so that it feels really, really good. So at the very least, you can get rid of some of the hunger for instant pleasure, which is what those Karnanists like to promise—maximum pleasure for minimum effort. For the maximum, it doesn’t have to be too much, as long as it’s instantaneous. That’s what they offer. So you’re going to need the sense of well-being, the sense of rapture and ease that come with working with the breath to give you at least some defense against these things and an ability to step back at least a little bit. It’s not going to take care of all the problems, because after all, the divine must come at you with not just ordinary pleasure. They come at you with the pleasure of conceit. They come at you with the pleasure of whatever the narratives that they offer are going to appeal to you. This is why the Buddha said we’re not so much attached to sensual objects as we are to sensual plans. We can plan about things. You can build up all kinds of narratives about the pleasures you’d like to have. And narratives offer all kinds of different pleasures. There’s excitement, there’s mystery, there’s suspense, there’s winning and losing, which can seem a lot more interesting than just in-out, in-out, as you have with the breath. So having the breath calm and refreshing is not going to take care of everything, but it’s going to be an important help. It’s going to be an important ally. There’s that chant just now. The Buddha’s talking about friends. It’s not just friends outside, it’s friends inside. You want an ally who really will help you, that it really is sympathetic. You can take the breath that way. The steps in breath meditation, the first four, you get familiar with long breathing, you get familiar with short breathing. Then, as the Buddha says, you breathe in and out, sensitive to the whole body. In other words, you try to see how the breathing relates to the whole body by expanding your range of awareness. Here, it helps to have a couple of good perceptions in hand, thinking of the body as a sponge. You breathe in, all the little holes in the sponge absorb the breath in, and then they let it go out, absorb it in, let it go out. So you don’t feel confined just to the passage of time. You feel the passages in the nose. And you can think of the breath energy nourishing different parts of the body as well. This gets into the step that’s called calming bodily fabrication. The bodily fabrication here is the breath. It’s called a fabrication because the Buddha wants you to notice the extent to which your intention plays a role in how you breathe. We’re not just here sitting with whatever kind of breath happens to come by. The intention of the breath, that you’re alert to breath, is already creating certain feelings. This is the point the Buddha makes. It’s what kind of feelings you’re going to create. You have the option. The first step is to breathe in a way that you feel full and refreshed. The Pali word, piti, we often translate it as rapture. It might better be translated as refreshment. Sometimes, in extreme cases, it really does have the intensity of rapture. But other times, it’s just a sense of fullness that you’re perfectly content to be right here and everything feels full and nourished, refreshed. One way you can work with that is to think of your hands right now. I think as you breathe in, the breath energy is coming in and out the hands. Do you feel any tension, tightness? Constriction in the hands? Think of it relaxing. Go through all the fingers, all the spaces between the fingers, then move your way up into the palms. After all, there comes a sense that you don’t have to interfere with the breath energy in the hands at all. It’s perfectly fine as it is. That’s the beginning of the sense of fullness. Then you think of that seeping up through the arms. See how much of your body you can be aware of in that way, that things are full, there’s no unnecessary constriction, no unnecessary tension, and just let it stay there. As the Buddha said in his description of the factors for awakening, the way to get the body and the mind to calm down is to develop a sense of rapture. Work at developing a sense of rapture. The word “work” here maybe sounds a bit too intense or too harsh. Play with it. Play with your feelings, the sensations in the body. Once there’s a sense of refreshment, then everything calms down. The reason the mind is prowling around all the time is because it’s hungry. The reason you start noticing pains here, pains there, is because there’s no place that really attracts our attention in a positive way. So you automatically go to the negative things. It’s a feeling that feels really, really nice, even in any one minor part of the body, but you can get it to stay that way. That attracts your attention more and more. And so at the very least, the kinds of defilements that come up and want to whisper to you about how hungry you are, or how tired you are, you’ve got an antidote. You can begin to step away from them. One of the strange things we keep hearing in discussions of Buddha’s teachings is how we have to see everything as one, that you are one with the world, that there’s no division between the knower and the known. But that’s not how you practice. By practicing, you actually have to separate yourself from things. In other words, you have to gain the discernment that gives you release. You have to see everything as separate, as something else. In other words, the greed is one thing, your awareness is something else. The little voices that come whispering in your ears, the con artists that promise you this, that, and the other kind of pleasure, this, that, and the other kind of satisfaction, see them as something else. Our problem is that most of the conversation in our mind is directed by these things. We’ve got defilements talking to our defilements most of the time. Our greed talks to our anger, our anger talks to our fear, our fear talks to our lust. And that’s a lot of the conversation that goes on in the mind every day. So we’re trying to take that verbal fabrication and turn it into something more useful. Learning to inhabit the body, learning to inhabit the breath. So you have a good, solid place to stay where you can see these other things as separate. They’re just events, they come and they go. Then you want to catch, where’s the hook? What’s the allure? Often that’s the hardest thing to see in a defilement. We’re attracted to them, and yet part of us don’t know this is really bad. And so we hide the allure. The reason why we’re after them is we’re ashamed to admit it to ourselves. This is where the sense of fullness from the breath can help, because you’re feeling really full, really refreshed. You’re a lot more willing to look at your old weaknesses, your old foibles, and see them for what they are. So try to develop some true friends inside, the friends that really are helpful. As for the con artists, the voices inside that make friends only to cheat you, be very careful. Don’t believe that every sweet voice in your head is a friend. Those voices have mastered the art of how to act friendly when they really don’t have any good intentions at all. We’ve identified with them because we think that they actually are helpful. What they are is old leftover members of the committee, old types of becoming, in other words, taking on an identity to gain a particular pleasure that you’ve never really looked at carefully. It’s like having a stable full of horses and other animals, and you’ve never really carefully looked at who you’re feeding in there. You just keep throwing the hay in there. It turns out you’ve got some unruly horses and you’ve got other kinds of animals. And you’ve identified with them as all of you as yours. So when they come to you, they have your voice, they have your tone of voice. Basically, what they are is foolish old ways of looking for happiness. But because they’re your ways, you’re content to live with them. And so this is why the Buddha teaches “not self” right from the very beginning. Learn to question these things that you identify with. Are they really worth identifying with? Do they really have your best interests in mind? Learn to see through their tricks. See them as something separate. And only then do you have any hope of getting past them.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2015/150801_Con_Artists_(med-fi).mp3>