Harsh Words, Harmful & Not

January 8, 2016

There’s a very close connection between right concentration and right resolve. The story has it that after the Buddha had tried many false starts, gone down many dead-end roads toward the goal of awakening, he finally got on the right track when He remembered that he had sat under a tree when he was a child and the mind had gotten into right concentration, the first jhana. He focused on his breath, thinking about the breath, evaluating the breath. He gave rise to a sense of ease and rapture. And he asked himself, “Could that be the way to awakening?” And the answer in his mind said, “Yes.” Why am I afraid of that pleasure and rapture? Because at that point he’d been imposing lots of austerities on himself, starving himself, holding his breath so he couldn’t even breathe, out of a fear of being attached to sensual pleasure. So he asked himself, “Why am I afraid of that?” And he realized, okay, that pleasure of that particular state of concentration was not a sensual pleasure. It was a pleasure of form. It was a pleasure of experience of the body, not in terms of what it looks like, but of how you feel it from within, like we’re working with the breath right now. This is your inner sense of the body. And you can inhabit this inner sense all the way down to the tips of your toes. And the pleasure that comes when the energy flows well in the body, that’s not a sensual pleasure. So he asked himself, “Why am I afraid of it?” And he realized there’s nothing to be afraid of. It wasn’t blameworthy. It didn’t take anything from anyone else or harm anyone else. It didn’t harm himself. At the same time, it was not intoxicating. Sensual pleasure can be very intoxicating. But this was something different. This actually cleared the mind. That’s one story. There’s another story about how he got on the right path. That’s when he realized he could divide his thinking into two sorts. Apparently, this is the next step. It’s getting on the right path. On the one hand, there was thinking imbued with sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness. On the other hand, there was thinking imbued with renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness. He realized that the first kind of thoughts, if you gave rein to them, would lead to all kinds of unskillful behavior. It would also not be conducive to getting the mind in the right concentration, whereas the other ones were conducive. You have to see the dangers of sensuality and that you’d be better off not spending your time thinking about how much you’d like to have this sensual pleasure or that sensual pleasure, or how you’re going to plan this one or plan that one. The mind is better off just dropping that kind of thinking. Same with thoughts of ill will, thoughts of harmfulness. Then he realized that thinking thoughtlessly about thoughts of renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness wouldn’t lead to anything unskillful, but it was tiring to the mind. And that’s how he got the mind into right concentration again. So right resolve, right concentration are very closely connected. That’s one of the reasons why we’re here, working on concentration. As we’ve resolved, we’d like to take what we know about the Buddha’s teachings on how to put an end to suffering and actually put them into practice. And it starts by clearing out qualities of the mind that are going to get in the way. They can come sneaking back, though. Particularly those thoughts of harmfulness. You can actually harm yourself while you’re sitting and meditating by berating yourself, as I said this afternoon. There are two kinds of self-criticism that you can do during the concentration. You find yourself wandering all over the place, and you’ve got to be firm with yourself on the one hand. You can’t just say, “Be friends with your anger,” or “Be friends with your lust,” or “Friends with your fear or greed.” You have to step back from them. As the Buddha said, if you can’t see these things as something separate, you’re not going to be able to deal with them. There’s an awareness in the mind, but there are these thoughts. And you’re asking yourself, “Why do you go for them?” I mean, the fact that they appear in the mind, that’s a result of past karma. But if you go for them and feed on them, okay, that’s present karma. So what are you doing? Here you are sitting with your eyes closed to all the world. You look like you’re meditating, but you’re not. And there are times when it is helpful to come down hard on yourself for that kind of thing. Otherwise the mind will find some little way of sneaking back in again. There are other times when you’re being harsh with yourself and you really are trying to harm yourself, i.e., pull yourself out of the path entirely. Those are thoughts of harm. When you tell yourself you’re too stupid to meditate and you’re hopeless, you might as well give up. That’s harmful. So you have to learn the distinction. You have to learn the distinction between strong words that are helpful and strong words that are going to be harmful. Because the mind sometimes does need strong words. Just like the Jhanas in Thailand, some of them are extremely critical of their students. But they want the students to know that they’re being critical. They’re trying to be critical of their defilements, not of them. They’re not trying to give them the idea that they can’t do this. In fact, they’re trying to encourage them, “Yes, you can. You can disidentify with your defilements.” So when somebody criticizes your greed, you don’t take it as a criticism of you. You say, “Yes, the greed is there. It’s something I’ve got to work with. You look at it, and yes, it really is bad. It leads to all kinds of problems.” So learn how to separate out that kind of criticism. And then you can give yourself that kind of criticism as well. You can criticize your greed, criticize your anger, your delusion, for the purpose of letting them go. Giving yourself the sense of encouragement that these are things you can let go. As the Buddha said, the defilements are like clouds. They obscure the sun. They’re not there forever. As long as you let them hang around, they’re going to be there. In other words, as long as you feed them. They’re like stray cats and dogs. If you feed them, they’re going to keep coming around. So you have to learn how to starve them. And you have to learn how to feed the good things in the mind. Learn how to feed your desire for concentration. Feed your mindfulness. Feed your alertness. Feed your ardency. So take care of how you talk to yourself as you’re meditating. Because that inner chatter is part of the direct thought and evaluation that is meant to get the mind to settle down. And as John Lee talks about, in terms of adjusting the breath and evaluating the breath, the sense of ease that comes from that. Then you let that spread through the body. Think of the breath energy spreading through the body in a way that feels really, really good. That’s one kind of direct thought and evaluation in getting the mind to settle down. The other kind is the encouragement you give to yourself in the times you need to settle down. That’s when you’re speaking to your fighting spirit. That’s when the harsh words are actually useful. That really is stupid. Here I am sitting and meditating, and all of a sudden I find myself thinking about tomorrow’s meal or yesterday’s meal, or the pleasures you’re going to have when you leave the monastery. That’s a waste of the time right now. So if you can separate the defilement from yourself, then you can criticize it as much as you want. Just don’t speak to yourself in a way that makes you give up hope or gets you discouraged. Your biggest enemy in the practice is discouragement, because this is not something that’s going to happen on its own. You have to have the strength of mind. Your morale has to be good. So do what you can to keep your morale up, because that will see you through a lot of problems. Things that look hopeless, as long as your morale is good, you’ll find a way out. That’s what conviction is for in the path. No matter what anyone else may say to you about your abilities, you’re going to show that you can do it. No matter what voices in the mind say that you can’t do it, you’re going to show that you can do it. That will see you through a lot of things. So learn how to listen to harsh words. If they’re aimed at your defilements, it can actually be good for you. If they’re aimed at you to discourage you, just let them pass. They’re not the kind of thing you want to feed on. And they’re not the kind of thing you want to engage in yourself if you find your mind taking that tack. Because once you’re here meditating, the only thing that can really effectively get you to stop is if your own mind tells you to stop. So as long as you don’t listen to that kind of speech inside, or don’t engage in that kind of speech inside, you can keep on going. And your right resolve will then turn into right speech, right action, right livelihood, right path. That’s how we get results.

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