When Things Start Going Well

October 11, 2016

The Buddha traced all the mind’s skillful qualities to heatfulness. As he said, all skillful qualities are contained in heatfulness, in the same way that the footprints of all animals on earth could be contained in the footprint of an elephant. These all skillful qualities are rooted in heatfulness. This is where they come from. Notice he didn’t say our skillful qualities come from our innate goodness. If we were innately good, there wouldn’t be much effort we would have to put into becoming skillful. But the fact is that it requires quite a lot of effort sometimes. Heatfulness is what encourages us to keep up the effort. We realize that if we don’t get our act together, they’re dangerous. Barry Lopez, the author, was up in northern Alaska one time, staying with some of the natives. He said the language had a lot of words for quality that he found difficult to translate into English. Awareness, the sense that there were dangers around. He said they had an excellent sense of humor, but at the same time there was a certain alertness to them that was more than just the ordinary. The quality he was trying to get at was the Buddha’s concept of heatfulness, the realization that there are dangers in our lives. And not all the dangers lie outside. There are some, of course, especially when you’re staying in the forest. We have rattlesnakes and other dangers out here. In Thailand they had cobras and all kinds of other snakes I hadn’t imagined before. And even to this day, when I see one of those banksia leaves lying on the ground that has that little diamond-shaped pattern, something deep inside me says, “Snake.” All that time in Thailand got me programmed that way. As the Ajahns often like to say, and Chan Foon would say, for instance, that the forest is the big Ajahn. It requires that you be heatful, that you not be complacent. And that habit, however, shows its greatest benefits when it’s brought inside. You realize there are dangers inside—laziness, complacency. These open you up to all kinds of other problems like greed, aversion, and delusion. So it’s good to try to make yourself as heatful as you can be as you go through this day, as you meditate, as you debate whether or not to practice. It’s in cases like that that the Buddha recommends thinking about future dangers. There’s a whole series of suttas on the topic that range everything from diseases that could strike you down, aging, illness, death, disruption in society, a split in the sangha. Or simply the fact that as time goes on, life in the sangha is going to deteriorate. The teachings are going to disappear. Some people like to think, “Well, if I have a really nice lifetime next time around, I’ll be willing to hang around for another lifetime.” But it could easily happen that conditions get worse. The whole purpose of this is to remind you that you have the opportunity right now to make the most of it. Don’t put things off to some undefinite time in the future. But heatfulness also means that when you’ve got something good going in the practice, be very careful to keep it going and to watch out for some of the pitfalls that can come when things are just starting to go well. The first one is the frustration that comes when you have a good session of meditation and the next session doesn’t go so well. That’s normal. In fact, all of these things, once you realize that they’re normal, they lose a lot of their power to pull you away. But you don’t give up and you don’t say, “Well, it’s just hit or miss.” You try to figure out, “What’s going wrong now? What’s the difference between now and what I was doing in the past session?” Remembering that the difference that really makes a difference is what you’re doing. We’d like to be able to click into the results we had last time, but you have to remember that the last time there were certain things you did to get into those good results. So whatever you can remember about what you did. And if you can’t remember specifically, we just go back to the original instructions. Work with the breath. Don’t think about the last time you meditated. Think about what you’re doing right now, this breath right now. Don’t even think about concentration. Just think about being with the breath. Give the breath your full attention. When they talk about the mind entering jhana or the stages of the right concentration, jhana is not the topic of the concentration. The topic is, say, the breath. And the word jhana doesn’t even have to be in your mind, but the word breath should be there. And there’s a spot that may have been comfortable last time. We’ll go back and see if you can recreate that sense of ease with the way you breathe at that spot. And if that spot doesn’t work, you say, “Well, let’s try something else.” Give it some time, though. And this time around try to be more observant about what you’re doing and how the mind settles down. Another thing to watch out for is sometimes you come out of a good, strong state of concentration and your mind goes in the opposite direction. It runs totally wild. It’s not used to being kept on a leash like this. It’s like a horse that’s not used to being with a bridle and bit. As soon as they go off his mouth, he goes running around. Just take that in stride. Let the mind run a little bit. And don’t think that the concentration is bad for you. Realize that your mind is simply not used to that kind of stillness. And there’s a part of the committee that will rebel. Don’t let it get you discouraged. Another problem that sometimes comes up is you come out of meditation and everything you do and say and everything everybody else does and says seems so meaningless. And you’ve had a really strong hit of pleasure. You come back and you realize that the pleasure you took in other things just doesn’t compare. I know quite a few people just want to give up whatever their job is after they’ve hit strong concentration. The problem is they’ve got a job that they’ve got to maintain. That’s when you have to realize that you live your life here in the human realm. There are certain duties you’ve got to do. Whereas you used to find a lot of pleasure in something and then all of a sudden the pleasure is gone, you’ve got to find other ways to motivate yourself to keep your duties going. But at the same time, realize that the real pleasure comes from the mind that is still. As the Buddha once said, “There is no happiness aside from stillness.” And if you’ve really experienced the stillness of concentration, there are lots of parts of the mind that would disagree. Let’s say happiness comes in having thrills and the big ups and downs, mainly the ups, and then you did a down, so you’re going to have another up again. For that, you’ve got to develop that strong sense of duty. And this is where heedfulness comes in. The duty on the one hand is to try to find a skillful pleasure from the concentration, and your other duties outside. You try to maintain those as well. And then see what you can do to bring at least a modicum of that inner space where you feel centered into all your activities. Because the concentration is not just for the hit of pleasure you get. As the Buddha said, that’s one of the uses of concentration. But it doesn’t stop there. You want to move on to the concentration that forms the foundation for mindfulness and alertness. You want a concentration that allows you to see through your defilements. In fact, as the concentration itself progresses, you find that in the deeper levels, the strong sense of pleasure and the strong sense of rapture go away. They’ve done their work. They’ve refreshed the body, they’ve refreshed the mind. But then you begin to realize that if you want to be really still and see things really clearly, you’ve got to let them go. This is one of the reasons why you don’t focus on them when they come up. You focus on the breath. Let them do their work. You’re getting practice in not letting the mind be overcome by pleasure. You do your work with the breath, the pleasure, and the rapture will take care of whatever they have to do. Then when they’ve done their work, then you can let them go and stay really still with a greater sense of balance and ease and solidity. This is the point where the concentration is not so disruptive. Because you realize it’s a solidity that’s even more conducive to a sense of well-being, a solid well-being, a well-being that lasts, doesn’t have quite the ups and downs of the first couple of times when concentration goes well. So watch out for these points. When things go well in the concentration, don’t get complacent. There will be ups and downs, and there will be some time spent in getting used to having the mind centered like this. So as you get more and more of the members of the committee on board, then you get a more balanced attitude towards the pleasure that comes. This is one of the ways in which you protect yourself from the dangers that are there in the mind. The dangers of complacency, the dangers of misreading what’s going on in the mind. There are some things that come up in the mind that seem to be signs that something’s not working, but that’s actually not the case. Like that reaction that sometimes happens after a strong state of concentration. It’s not that the concentration is bad for you, it’s just going to take a while to get used to it. That’s the case where something that looks bad is actually okay, when not as bad as it seems. There are other times when things that look really good are not as good as they seem. This is what you’ve got to watch out for as well. If something comes up in the meditation and it seems good, well, put a post-it note on it. Put a little question mark next to it. And if it’s something you can maintain, try to maintain it so you can see it over time. So you can check and make sure that it really is good. Some states of concentration, if you put too much pressure on the mind, you come out and you’re kind of in a daze. That’s not what we’re after. When concentration is deep and solid, it has a strong sense of stability. You come out and you’re very clear. So just because the mind can sometimes get in really, really deep concentration doesn’t mean it’s necessarily a good thing. Because you’ve got to see if the pressure that kept it there was too much. There’s that scene in that movie Ice Age 2. I was on a plane to Thailand one time, and we had this kid who was watching Ice Age movies all the way from Los Angeles to Korea. There’s one scene where the characters are floating in a boat in this misty sea, and all of a sudden these mermaids and mermen start appearing and look very tempting to the different characters. But all of a sudden you begin to realize that the mermaids have this little bout of static every now and then. And what looks like teeth are appearing in the bout of static. And of course, actually, it’s these fish that want to gobble them up. So as you’re meditating, when something looks good, we’ll look for that bout of static to see if it’s something that’s quite right. You’ve got to be alert all the time. That’s an important part of heedfulness. Watching what you’re doing, watching the results, and watching them again and again and again to see if there’s any downside in things that look good, or if there’s an upside to things that look bad. That’s a part of heedfulness that often gets overlooked, but it’s what’s going to keep you going on the path in a safe way. So that you don’t jump to conclusions. You test things to make sure they’re really good. Because, after all, if you’re trying to depend on something, you want to make sure it’s dependable. So you’re motivated by heedfulness. That’s what you are yourself. Look for things that are good in the long term and give them as much energy as you can.

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