Persistence & Discernment

January 20, 2017

Tonight we’ve come through the rain and the storm to show our gratitude for the king of Thailand. It’s been a hundred days now since he passed away, and we still want to make merit for him. We still think of him, the goodness he’s done for the Thai people, and he even spreads here to Wat Metta. All the people here, if it weren’t for him, Thailand wouldn’t have lasted through all those years of people trying to take it over, and who knows what would have happened to the forest tradition. We wouldn’t have had any chance of finding out about it for ourselves, to test the Dhamma for ourselves and benefit from the Dhamma. So we have a debt of gratitude, which we’re happy to pay. Because this kind of debt is paid by the practice. In the same way, as the Buddha said, if you want to show homage to him, you practice. You show gratitude to people who have passed away, and you practice and dedicate the practice to them. And the difficulty of coming here through the rain is nothing compared to the example set by the king, going through the jungles of Thailand, up into the mountains, into very poor places where the roads are non-existent, trekking in to make sure that progress can come to everybody in the country, even to people way off in the fringes. I want to remind you that goodness comes with difficulty, but that doesn’t make it any less good. It requires strength inside, strength of character. So when we take lessons from people of the past who have done good for the world, that’s one of the main lessons we have to take. If we want something good in life, we have to create goodness. And goodness requires that we put in effort, which is not just a matter of using strength. You also have to use our discernment. Discernment lies at the basis for all right effort. It begins with seeing that our skillful actions lead to what’s good, unskillful actions lead to what’s bad. So we’ve got to do what’s skillful and abandon what’s not. We have to learn how to recognize which is which. That’s the first rule for discernment. Because sometimes unskillful things start out very small, with a little bit of lust, or a little bit of anger, or a little bit of greed, or whatever, and at first it seems very innocent. But if we’re not careful, it can grow and grow and grow. And then it pushes us out. As in the John Chah’s image, you live in a house that has only one seat. As long as you’re sitting in the seat, you’re in control. But sometimes you let other things come and push you out of the seat. Greed takes over. Anger takes over. And you do this by slipping in surreptitiously. Until the seat is theirs. So you have to watch out for these things. You have to learn how to recognize unskillful states as they first whisper in the ear. You have to learn how to recognize skillful states when they first are very small, too, like a little bit of concentration. At first it doesn’t seem like much. It’s the same ordinary concentration that you use, say, to read a book or whatever. You listen to a conversation, you pay attention for a bit, and then you lose it. Well, you pay attention again, and you pay attention again, trying to stitch things together with your mindfulness. So those little bits of concentration add up. So learn how to recognize the little sprouts in the ground that are going to be good, that are going to be trees that’ll give you shade, give you fruit. Learn how to distinguish them from the weeds. That’s the first task that discernment has. The second task is making yourself want to do this. It’s not to go through the motions or force yourself. You’ve got to make yourself see that this really is a good thing. This is why you have to give yourself pep talks. This is why so many of the Dharma talks from the Ajahn’s in Thailand are pep talks, basically, encouraging you. Even when the Ajahn is yelling at his students in a Dharma talk, criticizing them heavily, it’s encouragement. It’s just that the Ajahn is concerned and that the students are worthy of concern. So take that attitude to yourself. There are times when you have to speak gently to yourself. Other times you have to be a little bit more harsh. Make sure that the mind doesn’t get complacent. Whatever’s required. Try to use your heedfulness. Try to use your compassion for yourself and other people. Your sense of pride that you’re a meditator, you’re a monk. Behave like a monk should. Sense of shame when you realize that you’re behaving as a monk shouldn’t be, behaving or thinking about things that you shouldn’t be. These are all ways of motivating yourself. You really want to do the practice, and that’s an important part of the role of discernment in right effort. The next part is to figure out what effort is needed right now. Does the effort have to be mainly on getting rid of unskillful qualities or giving rise to skillful ones? Are skillful ones already there? What can you do to maintain them? What can you do to make sure that the unskillful ones don’t come back? That last one tends to get neglected. When you’re meditating, you realize there’s going to be a difficult situation coming up in the course of the day. It’s legitimate to take some time out of your meditation to think about how you’re going to deal with it. Wait until the hour or the end of the period and use your concentrated mind, the mind that’s been still, the mind that’s been refreshed by the practice. Work out how you’re going to avoid giving rise to unskillful qualities in that difficult situation. Then there’s the final issue about how much effort is necessary right now. As the Buddha said, with some defilements, all you have to do is just look at them and they wither away. The reason they’ve been able to grow in the mind is because you haven’t been paying attention to them or you haven’t recognized them for what they are. Once you recognize them and look at them, you realize that this is really stupid. That doesn’t require much effort. All you have to do is just look at them and they’re gone. There are others, however, that when you stare at them, they stare right back. And even worse, they insinuate themselves. They make you think that that’s what your attitude is. You identify with them. They become you, and then it gets really hard to get rid of them. This is where you have to do everything you can, all the tools at your disposal—the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, the images you use to explain things to yourself, all the different forms of fabrication, asking questions, trying new perceptions, anything to get them out of the way. If you can’t get rid of it totally, at least give it a good karate chop so you can have some more time to get the mind into concentration again. So right effort isn’t brute force. The point of “just right” isn’t always middling. The image of the lute has to do with how much you’re capable of. If you’re only capable of so much, okay, that’s the amount of effort you put in. But there are times when the task requires more, and you’ve got to figure out how you get more energy, more discernment to deal with it. You don’t just muddle through the middle. You can figure out how you go to the root of things. That requires storing up more energy through meditation, through your concentration. Because this is a serious battle. These defilements, when they take hold, they can make you do all kinds of things that you’re later going to regret. That’s the worst thing to take with you as you go, is regret, that you hadn’t put more time into the practice. That what you thought was you or your attitude has left you, and it’s left you high and dry. You don’t want that to happen. So you leave those attitudes behind, and you benefit. It’s this way that discernment and effort go together. Discernment without effort is just empty knowledge. Effort without discernment is just a waste of time. It’s like testing the cow’s horn to get milk. You need the discernment to know what part of the cow to pull and how to pull, and actually do it. It’s a combination of knowing how and then actually doing it. The two help each other along, because you can have a theoretical knowledge, a general idea of how to do things. But it’s when you actually try them that you begin to learn more lessons. It’s about the ins and outs of getting what you want from the cow and getting what you want from the snake. The snake, as they say, you pin the snake down to get its venom. Some people say, “Why pin the snake down? Why hold on to it?” Well, you have to hold on to it because you want the venom for a good purpose. Because that’s what knowledge is for. It’s for you to put it into use and then get the benefit. So make sure that your efforts and your knowledge go together, your discernment and your persistence. Keep them very close to each other because they can teach each other a lot of lessons, lessons that give results. And the results we have here are like all the aspects of the Buddhist teachings on happiness. It’s not just your own happiness. In one sense, it is just yours, the happiness that comes when the mind is really trained. But the benefits go around. Other people benefit from the fact that we’ve been training our minds. If we want to dedicate the merit, like we’re doing tonight, we’ve got good merit to dedicate to the person who receives it and is going to be happy. That high quality merit is being sent its way.

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