Training the Mind Not to Suffer

March 21, 2017

These past couple of weeks I was back east. I happened to visit two people in the hospital, both with serious life-threatening illnesses. One who had meditated and the other who hadn’t. And the difference was striking. The one who had never meditated was having a lot of trouble dealing with the pain, dealing with the fact that his body wasn’t responding, doing things he’d been able to do before. And there was a lot of mental suffering, that sense of frustration, and creating suffering for the people around him. The nurses would say, “Don’t do this.” And then as soon as the nurses left, he turned to the people in the room and said, “Help me do this.” And if you didn’t go along with him, he’d accuse you of being with the enemy. So there was a lot of suffering all around, a lot of unnecessary suffering, because he’d never trained his mind. The other person was almost comical. He was flat on his back, couldn’t move for a long period of time. And at first he was struggling against the fact that he’d been a health nut for many, many years. And now he had a disease which he felt he shouldn’t have had. After all, he’d taken such good care of his body, why was his body being a traitor to him? But then he realized, well, this is the situation he had to deal with, and so he had to accept it. So he used it as a topic for meditation. The doctors came into the room, and they were concerned about him because he looked happy. They’d say, “You look happy. Can you follow my finger? What day is it? Who’s president?” Those kind of questions. A second doctor came in with the same questions. So some of the difference, of course, may have been a difference in personality, but it shows you that the fact of illness doesn’t have to be suffering. It doesn’t have to cause suffering. The issue lies in the mind, how well-trained the mind is. Because the mind can be trained. You know the Buddhist image of the arrows. You get struck with one arrow, but then you shoot yourself. He has you shoot yourself with a second arrow. But actually, you’re shooting yourself with many arrows if you’re not trained. And the mind, as he said, is so changeable and so quick to change that even he, a master of metaphors and analogies, couldn’t think of a good metaphor, a good analogy, for how quick it was. Even the flash of an eye is too slow compared to how quickly the mind can change. So you’ve got to watch out for your own mind. You may decide that you are not going to suffer, but if you haven’t had any real practice in learning how to separate your awareness from your body, learning how to get your thoughts under control, the mind can turn on you. So now that you’re healthy and strong, this is the time to get the mind under control. Because it’s going to get more difficult as time passes. And whatever effort’s involved, it’s well worth the effort. I was talking the other day about people afraid that the practice is going to be an execution or that it’s going to kill you. That’s just your greed, aversion, and delusion talking. All the members of the committee of the mind that want to be allowed to indulge in whatever pleasures they’ve found, just doing things their way. But they’re the ones that are going to turn on you. You can’t side with them. You’ve got to see that the mind has a committee here, and some of the members you’ve been identifying with for a long time. But they’re not really you, and they don’t have your best interests in mind. You’ve got to learn how to strengthen the members of the committee that do have your interests in mind, the ones that don’t want you to suffer, the ones that want you to behave in a responsible way. So whatever way you can motivate yourself to bring the mind to concentration and then learn how to drop all your distractions, use those, develop those. And the Buddha said you’ve got to generate desire, arouse your persistence, and uphold your intent. Those are factors of right effort. They’re also part of what the Buddha calls the basis for power, the basis for success. We hear all too often that meditation is not a meditation. It’s not a matter of good or bad meditation, or you shouldn’t judge your meditation. But hey, it’s a skill. And there are right and wrong ways of mastering the skill. And there are levels of mastering. And the more you’ve got the skill mastered, the more it can do for you. When they talk about not having any goals in the practice, that’s a teaching for when you’re on a very brief meditation retreat. I’m afraid that you’ll put the mind in a pressure cooker trying to have something to show at the end of the retreat. So they tell you to put those goals aside. But when you think of the practice as a lifelong practice, and the issue of suffering is a lifelong issue, you’ve got to have goals. That means that you have to look at your life and establish priorities. What’s really important in your life? You can’t just grab at everything that you want. It’s like planting a garden. If you just plant every seed that you want in there, you run into the problem that some seeds kill the other seeds. For example, if you want eucalyptus trees in your garden, you’re going to kill everything else. So you’ve got to keep the eucalyptus trees out and grow things that are actually useful for you. In the same way you’re sitting here, you’ve got the opportunity to think about anything you want to for the whole hour. Nobody’s keeping check. Nobody’s forcing you to meditate. But you’ve got to realize pain is there. Aging, illness, and death are there. As the Buddha said, there are all kinds of dangers. Not only aging, illness, and death, but society can break apart. The sangha can get split. When things like that happen, it’s really difficult to practice. So you’ve got the opportunity now. When the Buddha talks about focusing on the present moment, it’s always in that context that you don’t know how much time you have. But you do know that you have right now. So right now is the time to do the practice. Whatever effort is required, you do it. Whatever problems that come up in the mind, you have to deal with them. You can’t put them off to a later date. Sometimes they’re bigger problems. You realize, “I can’t tackle this whole problem right now,” but try to break it down into little pieces. As John Fuehring said, the effort is something that’s small, but it’s constant. In Thai, it’s a play on words. The word for “small,” “nit,” is also the word for “constant.” The spell is differently pronounced. It’s the continuity of the practice that makes all the difference. In John Mun’s terms, you want to practice in the shape of a circle. In other words, all around, no caps, all around the year, all around the day. The goal we want is something that’s timeless, so you have to make your practice timeless. In other words, you don’t put aside time for the practice now, and then now is the time to do something else aside. You want to make everything part of the practice—being mindful, being alert, being ardent—to make sure that any unskillful quality that comes up in the mind is dealt with as quickly and as effectively as possible, so that when you begin to sort things out in the committee of the mind, you can starve all the members that would make you suffer in unnecessary ways. There will be some suffering in the course of the practice. After all, sitting long periods of time can be painful. Depriving yourself of the pleasures that you want, that’s painful. But those are pains with a purpose. But the pains of thrashing around when you’re getting old and ill, when you’re dying, those serve no purpose at all. That’s what really struck me when I went back to visit my father years back as he was dying. He was in a lot of pain, suffering quite a bit, again, from not having trained his mind. I kept thinking how this served no purpose at all. All the pain he had was putting himself through. Because, after all, that’s the pain that the Buddha has us work on. There’s the pain and the three characteristics. Things are inconstant, so they’re going to be stressful. That’s just the way things are. But then there’s the pain or the suffering or the stress and the formidable truths. That comes from craving and clinging. And that’s not necessary. But that’s the pain with which we inflict ourselves. And that’s the pain that really goes to the deep end of the heart. That was the pain the Buddha focused on. The pain he was wanting to cure. Because it’s unnecessary and because we’re the ones who have to undo it. He gives us the tools so we can. Everything is all laid out. As he said, he wasn’t the sort of teacher who had a closed fist that would reveal his really crucial teachings only to a select few. He was teaching everybody. He taught the same teaching in his last days as he taught in the first, the Eightfold Path. Nothing got added, nothing got subtracted. That’s all very clearly there. The problem is we have a lot of our conditions. We say, “Well, I’ll practice on this condition or I’ll practice on that condition. I don’t like this part of the Dhamma. I want to have this erased and I want to have it replaced with this.” And the more conditions you place in the practice that way, the more obstacles you put in your way. The Buddha was serious. There is an end to suffering and it can be accomplished through the path. He saw that this is a serious problem, the way we inflict ourselves all this unnecessary, pointless suffering. So you have to ask yourself, when you’re stuck in the hospital—I hope you never have to be stuck in the hospital, it’s pretty miserable—if you’re ever stuck there because something is going wrong in your body, which kind of person do you want to be? The one who’s flailing around? Or the person who’s so happy that the doctors are afraid that something’s wrong? Because they don’t have much experience with people who don’t suffer from their illness. For them, suffering from their illness is normal. You have to ask yourself, do you want to be just a normal person when you’re ill, or do you want to have something special? Something to ace up your sleeve? Something when the pains come and the inability to move? When you can no longer take care of your body? Try to be sure that you’re going to be in a position where you can take care of your mind, where that’s not going to be anything to worry about. That’s when you show true compassion for yourself and all the people who will be around you at that time. The more you can control your mind, the less you place a burden on others. So do your best to get it under your control now.

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