Imperturbable in a Difficult World

May 22, 2017

You may have noticed the contrast in two of those chants just now. One talks about how the world is swept away, without shelter, no one in charge. Then the chant that begins, “May I be happy,” sounds like a whine of hope. But it’s not. It’s what the whole foundation of the Dhamma is, that desire for happiness in the midst of all the change and ups and downs of the world. The reason we suffer is not because of the events of the world. It’s because of the way the mind interprets and internalizes the events of the world. And it can learn a new way. That’s why we meditate. We come to the present moment, not because it’s a wonderful moment, but we can make it a good moment. Because it’s right here that we use the mind in a way that can create suffering. But we can also learn the habits that go in the other direction. To learn how not to suffer, either from things inside or from things outside, no matter how bad they may be. We start with something pretty simple, focusing on the breath. Taking a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Noticing where you feel the breathing process in the body and centering your attention there, wherever the breath is most prominent. And then ask yourself, “Is it comfortable?” If it is, you keep up that rhythm. If it’s not, you can change. Make the breath shorter, or try in long and out short, or in short and out long. Lower, heavier, lighter. More blatant, more subtle. Try to see what kind of breathing feels good right now. And allow your mind to meld into the breath. The more comfortable the breath, the easier it’ll be to feel at one with the breath. Think of the breath going into the most sensitive spots of the body. And here, by breath, we’re not talking about so much the air coming in and out the nose, but the feeling of energy as it flows in and flows out. And that can course through the body, in any part of the body, to find the parts of the body that are most sensitive to that and breathe in a way that feels good right there. And then learn how to protect that. That’s going to be your foundation. If other thoughts come in, just let them go. Right now you’re working on a skill. It’s like when you’re trying to make something as a carpenter. You’ve got to work at what you’re doing, and someone comes in and wants to talk, or wants to entertain you, or pull you away. You have to say, “Nope, nope, nope. I’ve got to work on my work. I want to develop this skill so I’m good at it.” So the thoughts that come into your mind, don’t think of them as your thoughts so much. They’re just thoughts. The voices in the mind don’t have to be your voices. There’s just a committee in there. And they’re not all that sure that they want to meditate, but you want to meditate. You’re giving the mind a good, solid foundation, because this is what it’s going to need in the face of all the ups and downs of the world. We have another chant that we didn’t do tonight, which talks about aging, illness, death, and separation. And then it goes on to say that we’re the owners of our actions. And that’s the way out. By taking charge of our actions—what we do, what we say, what we think—it really helps to have a good foundation inside, because it’s so easy to get pushed around by what other people are doing. And with a good foundation, one, we can learn how not to be pushed. They can say what they want, do what they want. But we’ve got something inside that they can’t touch, a sense of well-being that we create here. And then two, we don’t want to do anything that would create more bad karma, because it is our actions that determines the kinds of things we’re going to meet up with in the world. In particular, our mental karma determines the habits we’re going to develop in the mind that will or will not lead to suffering. So you have to be very careful about how you act, especially in situations of danger, especially in situations where people are really provoking. That’s when you have to be impeccable. I’ve been reading a biography of a famous old French diplomat, Talleyrand, who survived the revolution, survived Napoleon, and many different changes of government. He was the most steady thing they had there in France. I just read a passage where Napoleon is suspected that Talleyrand may be plotting his assassination. So he calls him in and yells at him, loses his cool, basically. And at one point comes up and shakes his fist at him. And here he is, the most powerful man in Europe, yelling at you, shaking his fist. And Talleyrand is completely impassive. He doesn’t say anything, doesn’t respond, just looks back. He was able to stare down the most powerful man in Europe. The next day he asked, almost as if it was a casual question, someone else in the court, “Which prison is it going to be that they’re going to throw me into?” And it turned out Napoleon didn’t dare throw him into prison. So he continued doing his duties. And the more he continued doing his duties, the more Napoleon was afraid of him. Other people would have run away to hide. But the fact that he did his duties impeccably meant that there was no opening for him to do anything to him. No, I don’t know what his inner sources of that implacability were. But the meditation is one way that you can develop that kind of quality, so that no matter how provoking other people are, you’re not going to do anything unskillful. You may have to be very formal, sometimes even cold, but impeccable in your inner words and your deeds. And that means, of course, that you can’t let them push you around. They’ve probably learned your buttons. So you have to make sure that you don’t respond to those buttons. And again, that’s what having a good, solid center here in the mind can help you do. Because the reason we’re so susceptible to the influences of the world is that we want to feed on the world. We’re looking for our pleasures, we’re looking for our satisfaction out there. And the world does have its pleasures. You used to be in that posture where you’re just gobbling things down from outside. Then when bad things come along, you’re going to gobble them down too. You’ve got to realize that true happiness comes from within. It comes from this ability to give the mind a good place to stay, a good center, and then a good way to think about what else is happening out in the world. Make a distinction between the bad things out there and the suffering you’re causing yourself in here. Ask yourself, “Why do you create that bridge that allows bad things to come in and weigh down the mind?” The concentration gives you a good place to stand to see those things and then a right view about exactly what suffering is and how it’s caused. What is it? The Buddha said it’s five aggregates. That was his technical term for the different activities that the mind engages in to feed on things. There’s form, which is the form of your body, but also the form of the food out there that you like to feed on. Of course, feeding here can be not only physical food but also involve mental food as well. There are feelings, feelings of pain when you’re feeling hungry and pleasure when you’re feeling full. Perceptions are labels about what kind of hunger you’ve got right now. Is it a hunger for something salty, something sweet, something more substantial, something lighter? And then you look around and you try to label the things outside as to whether or not they’re going to be useful in satisfying your hunger. It’s like a child going through the life unit. One just crawls through the living room, comes up with something, and puts it in his mouth right away. That’s one of our first questions. Is this edible? Then there’s fabrication, which is the way the mind shapes things, the way it makes plans and tries to adjust the world to its liking. In other words, you’ve got a potato. What are you going to do with it? You can’t eat it raw. So you’ve got to cook it. How are you going to cook it? That’s fabrication. Then finally there’s consciousness. That’s the awareness of all these things. This is the Buddha’s analysis. What suffering is. We cling to these activities. And so when you get the mind still, you can begin to see these activities. You’re employing them even here as you’re trying to get the mind concentrated. There’s the form of the body that we’re focused on. There are the feelings of pleasure we’re trying to create as we breathe. Our perception, in other words, the metal label that holds us with the breath. Fabrication, the way we talk to ourselves about the breath. And consciousness, our awareness of these things. So we’re employing these activities, but we’re doing them in a skillful way. So instead of causing us to suffer, they help lead us away from suffering. This is the way the Buddha has us analyze things. In other words, put things in impersonal terms. Even on a really basic level, that’s what he recommends. He recommends that when someone says something really hurtful, tell yourself, “An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear.” That’s it. Don’t talk about who made the sound, why they made it, what they meant, what their intentions were, or how good or bad you feel about it. Just say, “An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear,” and see if you can leave it at that. That makes it impersonal. If it’s impersonal like that, then there’s a lot less tendency to suck it in. Our minds are like vacuum cleaners. We suck in all the dirt. And the Buddha is teaching us how to turn off the vacuum cleaner. So when a sound comes at the ear, it just stops at the ear. And that’s all you have to worry about. Other times, when he has you contemplate that when people are saying really hurtful things, well, that’s the nature of human speech. There are people who say true things and people who say false things. There are people who say kind things and people who say unkind things. There are people who say things that are helpful and people who say things that are useless. This is the nature of human speech. This is the kind of speech we’re going to find in the world. It’s when people say things to you that are false and ill-meaning and useless. It’s nothing out of the ordinary. When you can see that as normal, then your mind can stay normal. So learning how not to suffer is a combination of virtue, concentration, and discernment. Virtue in the sense that you’re not going to do anything that’s going to harm anybody. Even though it means sometimes opening yourself up to harm. But as long as you don’t let your mind get harmed, you’re okay. Concentration, the sense of well-being that you can create inside, that gives you the strength. That’s your new inner food, sort of trying to feed on things outside. And then discernment, your ability to analyze what’s going on in terms and depersonalize it and take the sting out. So we can live in this world where everything is being swept away, no one’s in charge. That offers no shelter, but we can still be happy. Because as we get the mind to settle down in concentration, we can find that there are deeper recesses of happiness buried here in the mind. But even before you reach those deeper recesses, the fact that you can center the mind in the midst of whatever, that gives you a good, solid foundation. So as things are being swept away, your happiness can be solid. Your well-being can be solid. Because you’re not depending on the things out there that are being swept away. You’re depending on the new skills you’ve developed inside. So give some time to developing them. Because they’ll repay you many times over.

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