The Only Ticket Out of Here

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There’s a far side cartoon where two penguins are in a nice flow. One of them is playing a piano. The other one has a straw hat and a cane for a song and dance number. And the one on the piano says, “Okay, no, no, no, we’ve got to start over from the top. Remember, this is our only ticket out of here.” What’s the Dhamma lesson there? If you’re going to get out of a bad situation, it requires a skill. We come to the practice because we’re suffering in one way or another. We start out with aversion to the suffering, but aversion is not going to hack it. If the end of suffering could be found through aversion, we would have gone there a long time ago. It requires a skill, because the proper attitude is not so much aversion but dispassion, which is something very different. And the reason is because aversion holds in it desire. It’s a frustrated desire. And when a desire is frustrated, it doesn’t mean the desire has gone away. It just turns. And it contains the original desire within it. You think about the Buddha and his path, all those years of self-inflicted torture. There was a lot of aversion there, but behind the aversion was desire. In fact, he said that was one of the keys to the insights that led to his awakening, was seeing that even in the aversion there’s desire. Even in the craving for non-becoming, there’s craving for becoming, or craving in becoming in that craving. You’ve got a frustrated desire and you want to assume the identity of the person who’s going to destroy everything that disappointed you. That just becomes inner becoming. So we have to take that aversion, and we use it. After all, if we weren’t averse to suffering, we’d say, “What the hell? Why bother?” But it has to be tamed. It has to be tempered. We focus on developing concentration in the mind. At first it seems like a diversion, a very pleasant one. All too often you’ve probably heard that concentration is a long, scenic route. To awakening, where the fast one is vipassana. But there’s no real vipassana or no effective vipassana without concentration. The people who teach you that, you can choose one route or the other, often warned about getting stuck on the pleasures of concentration. But it’s a good place to be stuck. You’re finding a happiness that you didn’t have before that’s totally free from blame, totally free from harm. It actually helps to clear the mind. Unlike passions for other things, passions for sensuality in particular, that clouds the mind. But a passion for concentration can put the mind in a position where it sees itself clearly. So what you’re doing is taking that leftover passion that was animating your aversion, and you devote it to being very patient, very meticulous, learning to get the mind in a good, solid state. Because it’s only there that the insights are going to be able to go deep into the mind. It’s like you’re softening up the mind, which has been hardened by aversion, so that when an insight comes, it can go deep. You can’t observe your mind without strong concentration, but the things you observe come and go. You don’t really know how deeply they go. And you can gain an insight, but you’re not sure about the context. They’re just scattered, isolated insights that don’t add up to anything. That’s when the mind has been in good, strong concentration, and you can make your mindfulness continuous. That’s when you can begin to see connections. And so when you can see connections, you understand the meaning of the insight, and it’s actually usable. Because you begin to see, bit by bit, as you’re learning how to get the mind under control, what’s going on in the mind, what are the machinations, what are the steps, say, in distraction, what are the steps in creating a state of becoming as a distraction form, so the becoming of the concentration itself. Then you begin to realize that what originally seemed like a distraction is actually giving you the tools you need to deal with the first problem. And because concentration requires a certain balanced attitude, the attitude that the Buddha calls “making your mind like earth,” it’s not so reactive. You’re getting closer and closer to actual dispassion, which is, as some of the Thai say, “drunk with desire.” You were drunk with aversion, you were drunk with desire. Now you sober up from both. Because you have to be sober in the sense of having the patience and the endurance and the meticulousness to get the mind in concentration as you learn the peculiarities of your own mind. When it needs to be more focused on one part of the body and when you can get it to spread to other parts of the body, how you can nudge it in the direction of right concentration. Or, as the Buddha says, your awareness fills the whole body, your sense of pleasure, rapture fills the whole body, and everything seems balanced. It’s going to take a while to get it into that kind of balance. And that’s with any skill. You develop maturity as you master the skill. There have been psychological studies done to show that people who have mastered a skill just have to be more mature, more patient, have a more resilient attitude, so they’re not dominated by their greed, aversion, and delusion. Mastering the concentration gives you insight into the workings of the mind, gives you a more mature attitude, develops the emotional maturity you need in order to get closer and closer to dispassion. And at the same time, seeing the workings of the mind, you begin to realize that this is the key to understanding why the mind is creating suffering, even though it doesn’t want the suffering. And how it can stop. So instead of pushing, pushing out of aversion, you’re having to step back and be patient enough to develop a skill that will open things up inside. So when you finally do see exactly how the craving is causing the suffering, and how the clinging constitutes the suffering, you lose your taste for it. And in that case, it’s not aversion, it’s not desire, both of which are motive forces to keep on fabricating. But now the motive force is gone. And that’s when the mind is ready to open up to something unfabricated. So this is a skill we’re working on here. It takes time. It’s going to require that you develop a more and more mature attitude, be more and more willing to give of yourself. So instead of just rushing in and saying, “I want nirvana right now,” the Dharma is not a drive-in. You can’t drive up to a window and say, “I want nirvana right now.” You can’t wind nirvana with a side of fries and get it at the next window. It requires that you grow emotionally inside, become more mature inside. And that may take time, but it’s time well spent. Because consider the alternative. Getting some desires, losing some, getting frustrated in some areas, going back and forth, swinging back and forth between aversion and desire, and aversion and desire and passion, and going nowhere in particular. Whereas the practice of the Dharma takes you someplace. It’s your ticket out of here. And in keeping with the fact that you’ve had to grow emotionally and become more mature emotionally, the reward that comes is something that’s all around. Just like you’ve had to grow as a person all around, the reward is all around, too.

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