Train Your Inner Teacher

September 14, 2017

The Buddha has a number of lists where he talks about the very basic qualities that are needed in the practice, the ones that are your foundations for everything else. And the lists differ. In one case it’s truth. In another case it’s heedfulness. In another it’s appropriate attention. In some cases it’s having admirable friends. What we learn from all these lists is that you start where you are and find something good in where you are, and you build on that. With heedfulness, for instance, it’s a general sense that there is danger out there. But heedfulness can be misguided. Because you may identify the wrong dangers or you may identify the wrong things that you’re doing that put yourself into danger or that would constitute safety. This is where appropriate attention comes in. The Buddha gives you information where to look, what inside you is going to lead you to act in unskillful ways. In one list he has greed, aversion, and delusion. In another he has desire, aversion, delusion, and fear. So appropriate attention warns you that if you find these things in yourself, you’ve got to do something about them. You can’t follow them. It gives you guidance. Basically, appropriate attention is learning how to ask the right questions. Where is the real danger? What can I do to prevent it? When you’re asking the right questions, you have the hope of getting the right answers. There’s a famous novelist who said, “If they can get you to ask the wrong questions, it doesn’t matter what answers you come up with.” But the Buddha was not the sort of person who wanted you to answer the wrong questions. He wanted you to see the right questions, understand the right questions, and apply them to your life. And that’s what he did. That’s what he found in his quest for awakening. That’s how he found awakening. By focusing on something that was not quite right in his mind and asking himself, “Where does this come from? What action am I doing that’s causing this? And how can I change?” He sometimes came up with the wrong answers, but then he recognized them as wrong and so he went back to self-correct. All of this is an aspect of appropriate attention coupled with mindfulness. Your mindfulness has to be animated by heatfulness, animated by appropriate attention, for it to become right mindfulness. There’s that passage we studied today in which the Buddha compares the path to a chariot. The animals drawing the chariot, the horses, are your conviction and your discernment. And they yoke to the chariot by shame, your sense of shame. Jhana is the axle, your persistence and efforts are the wheels. Mindfulness is a charioteer. But again, mindfulness has to be educated. Just plain old mindfulness is simply a faculty of the memory. You can remember anything. But heatfulness and appropriate attention help you remember, “What do I need to know to do the skillful thing right now? What have I learned from the past? Because there are lessons you can learn from the past. Sometimes you hear that each moment is so fresh that you have to have a totally fresh attitude, bring nothing but beginner’s mind, where all things are possible. Well, if you just keep on having beginner’s mind all the time, then everything may be possible, but nothing is actualized. There are lessons you can learn from the past, from what you’ve done, what you’ve seen other people do. Mindfulness is, as the Buddha said, the protective charioteer. In John Fuang’s image, mindfulness is the teacher who sets the lesson plan for the day and then makes sure that the students follow the lesson plan. It doesn’t let them wander around and do things that are not going to be in their own best interest. We’ve all probably had teachers in the past, the ones who were really strict with us, who we didn’t like when we were having them as our teachers. But then we look back and we realize we learned the most from them. But you want a strict teacher inside. And the strict teachers, of course, are not the ones who just like to whip students or discipline them. The strict teachers are the ones who realize the students are going to need this knowledge, and this knowledge is going to make a difference. So they do everything they can to make sure the students pick up the knowledge, to learn the skills. They’re going to stand them in good stead. A couple years back, there was a student of Ajahn Mahaprabhu’s who came to the States and gave a talk up at a monastery in Northern California about what it was like being with Ajahn Mahaprabhu, who has a reputation for being really strict. One of the monks there complained,”Well, where’s the compassion in all this?” The student wisely said, “Well, it was there in the strictness, which was his compassion.” And, of course, he didn’t want to be the person who did all the work for you. He wanted his students to learn how to pick up that strictness themselves, and how to use it appropriately, knowing that there are times to lighten the touch, and other times when you have to come down heavy. So you have to train your inner teacher to be strict and compassionate. Because this inner teacher is going to see you through all the aspects of the practice. When you get into concentration, it becomes the faculty of evaluation. And if it’s been well-trained through your practice of virtues, through your practice of generosity, then the evaluation will help the mind to settle down. Because you’re used to looking at what you’re doing and learning how to criticize yourself without getting wounded by the criticism or getting all worked up, requiring trigger warnings all the time. You just learn how to be very matter-of-fact about what’s working and what’s not working. Think of the image of the cook. The cook prepares all kinds of food for his master. And then notice, what kind of foods does the master reach for? What kind does he talk about a lot? What does he praise? What does he eat a lot of? Will he provide more of that? As the Buddha says, that kind of cook gets a reward. Then there’s the cook who doesn’t notice. He just produces whatever, without any concern for what the master likes. And the master’s not going to give her any reward. It’s the same with your mind. One of the duties of evaluation is to see, “What does the mind need right now?” What is it like right now? And to have some ingenuity and openness about what might work. Willing to take on, as the Buddha said, painful practice when it’s necessary and pleasant practice when it’s necessary. There’s that Zen saying that the great way is not difficult for those with no preferences. That doesn’t mean you’re totally without any preference at all. We prefer not to suffer. But the question is, what’s needed not to suffer? Sometimes there’ll be things that you’re going to have to do that you don’t really like to do, whether they’re not fun or engaging or whatever. But they’ve got to be done. That’s where the principle of no preferences is important. You check to see what needs to be done. You’ve trained your inner teacher. You’ve trained your mindfulness. You’ve trained your awareness to be alert to what you’re doing and to the results you’re getting. And you’ve trained the part of the mind that’s willing to listen to this, to carry it through. It’s in that way that you become both your own teacher and your own student. It’s in this way that you become independent, as the Buddha said in the Buddhist teaching that at the moment of seeing the deathless, that’s when you know what works. You know that your standards for judgment have finally come up to the Buddha standards. This is one of our problems in modern Buddhism. People tend to want to drag the Buddha down. Whatever level they’re at, they feel disturbed that there might be somebody out in the universe who has higher standards than them. So they pull everything down to their level. That’s no way of raising yourself up. We’re here not to just please ourselves. We’re here because we know that we’re suffering. And we earnestly want to stop. So train your inner teacher through being heedful, through developing appropriate attention. So that you become your own admirable friend. And you’ve got the internal and the external causes for awakening right there inside you.

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