Take Heart

October 21, 2022

We tend to be impatient at the practice. We hear that the Buddha says there are four kinds of practice: fast and pleasant, fast and painful, slow and pleasant, and slow and painful. We’d like to put in an order for the fast and pleasant. It’s not like planning your itinerary saying, “I’m going up north in California.” You can decide if you’re in a hurry, you can take the five. If you’re not in a hurry, you want to do a little sightseeing, you can take the 101 or another one. But the practice is not like that at all, because a lot of it has to depend on your habits, your background. And sometimes you find yourself stuck in a path that’s slow. And it’s very easy to give up. The results don’t seem to be coming. But you have to remember, a path that seems slow takes a lot less time than life without a path. Life without a path has no real purpose, no real direction. And it goes on and on and on. Think about all the aeons you’ve been through. Sometimes if you don’t get out, there’ll be more aeons like that. And it’s up and down, up and down. There’s a lot of suffering. Remember that image the Buddha had of the tears you’ve shed over the loss of a mother, the loss of a father, brother, sister, daughter, son? In each case, it’d be more than the water and the oceans. And how many more tears do you want to shed? This is why it’s good to think on a regular basis about large time, deep time, to get your practice into perspective. You get a little sense of that when you come here to the monastery. If you’re used to having your days filled with activities, all of a sudden the day seems awfully long when there’s nothing to do in the afternoon except meditate. Yet strangely, these long days, when you look back at them, seem to go by very quickly in the sense of the past week, the past month. Your sense of time in the monastery is very different from your sense of time out in the lay world. And it’s good to carry a little bit of that monastic standard time with you. So you’re not living by the rhythms of the new cycle or the rhythms of the new cycle. You’re living by the rhythm of the week. Catch your practice into perspective. You can also think about the Ajahn’s. Ajahn Mun, they say, practiced for 25 years before he gained any of the noble attainments. But he kept going. Part of it was his conviction. Part of it was his heedfulness. And part of it was desire. As he said, he didn’t want to come back. He didn’t want to be the laughing stock in the defilements ever again. So think of those lists that the Buddha gives to the different stages of the practice, the lists in the Wings to Awakening. The first members of the list are good ones to underscore, to ask yourself, if the practice isn’t going well, how do I keep myself encouraged on the practice, to keep at it? In terms of the basis for success, you start with desire. You’ve suffered a lot. In fact, you don’t realize how much you’ve been suffering, but there’s an awful lot. And you want to get out. That desire is encouraged. I don’t know how many times you hear people say, well, the desire to change things is craving and craving is a cause for suffering. But the Buddha divided desire into two types, skillful and unskillful. Skillful desire is the skillful desire in the past. The desire to keep unskillful qualities from arising, or if they have arisen, the desire to abandon them. The desire to give rise to skillful qualities if they’re not there, and if they are there, then you have the desire to maintain them and develop them further. That kind of desire the Buddha praised. The image that Venerable Ananda gave us of going to a park. In practice, he said to put an end to desire, but desire is part of the practice. He had mentioned this to a Brahmin, and the Brahmin said, well, in that case, it’s an endless path, because how can you use desire to get rid of desire? So Ananda gave the image of going to the park. You go to the park because you want to go to the park. Once you get there, what happened to your desire to go to the park? Well, it’s already been fulfilled, so the desire can be put down. Well, it’s the same with the path. If you have a desire to develop the path, then that’s a good thing. Just make sure that your desire is focused on the steps. If you think too much about where the path is going, and focus all your attention on the fact that you’re not there yet, that kind of desire can get in the way. You tell yourself, okay, this is a path that goes in this direction, and the next step is going to be right here, and the next step is going to be right here, and you focus on each step as you’re doing it. And whether the path is long or short, you know it’s going to a good place. So you develop patience, you develop endurance, and you stick with each step as it comes. In the Five Factories of the Five Strings, it starts with conviction. And what does that mean? Well, one of the things you’re convinced of is that he did it through the power of his own actions. And as he said, it wasn’t the case that he had anything special that other people couldn’t have. He said it was through qualities of ardency, hatefulness, and resolution. In other words, you really stick with it, and you develop those qualities within yourself, and you can do it too. That too is another topic that Ananda talked about. We practice in order to get rid of conceit, but we use conceit in the practice. The conceit here is, other people can do it. They’re human beings. I’m a human being, and if they can do it, I can too. We look at the Ajahn’s, and we see them at the end of their practice. Sometimes we read their biographies, and there’s a tendency in the Thai biographies to extol the Ajahn. I’m not talking about his weak points or weak times in the practice. But they’re there. Everybody goes through difficulties. It’s your attitude that makes a difference. If you’re approaching the difficulties as reasons to stop, okay, they’ll stop. But they won’t stop you. You take them as challenges. You figure out there must be a way around this. Other people have gotten around this particular obstacle. It’s not the case that you have any defilements that nobody else has ever had. They’re the same defilements, and they can all be solved. Whether it takes a long time or a short time, have that confidence. That’s another aspect of conviction. If you can do it, you’ve got to learn how to maintain your confidence. You have to learn to realize that allowing yourself to get depressed, allowing yourself to get upset about how long the path is taking, you’re destroying your soul means of succeeding at the path. So you can’t indulge in those emotions. You have to see them as a danger. These are defilements. You have to learn how to pull yourself out of your bad moods, or you’re out of your discouragement. The Buddha gives lots of ways of thinking about that. You think about your generosity, the things you’ve given in the past. You think about your virtue at the times when you could have behaved in unskillful ways, but you chose not to, even though there may have been a sacrifice involved. But you managed to do it. The Buddha says you can think about the qualities that make people devas. You’ve got those qualities as well. Conviction, virtue, generosity, learning, discernment. You have those to at least some extent. You will nurture them, work with them, find happiness in them. Because that’s part of the practice too. There’s been this tendency in the last century or two to divide meditation from the rest of the practice. You make it totally an affair of the head, figuring things out, gaining insights. But originally it was all part of a larger whole. The practice of merit was nothing antithetical to the practice of insight. In fact, by developing virtue, goodwill, generosity, you make it a lot easier to observe your own mind. You get used to cultivating thoughts of, “How can I be generous? How can I hold to the precepts more consistently? How can I have goodwill for larger and larger numbers of people more consistently?” And you have a mind that’s thinking in those directions. It’s a lot easier to watch that mind, observe that mind. That’s how insight is based not on aversion. It’s based on a sense of dispassion. Dispassion, which is different. Dispassion is when you’ve had enough of something. You’ve gained the benefits of a particular practice. You see that it’s good, but it can take you only so far. The Tai and Chans compare it to growing up. The games you used to play as a child that used to hold fascination for you. You look at them now and they seem awfully simple-minded. Or you think of the food that you used to like as a child. I think back on Hostess cupcakes and Twinkies. You don’t have the money to buy those things. It’s total garbage. There comes a point when you realize it is garbage and you can move on. Not aversion, simply saying, “I’ve had enough.” It’s easier to say, “I’ve had enough,” when you’ve been doing good things and appreciating the goodness that comes from that. That quality of conviction is based on heedfulness. That’s what the Buddha developed. Realizing that if you don’t do this, who’s going to do it for you? Nobody else can do this practice for you. And if you don’t do it, you’re leaving yourself exposed to the possibility of long, long-term harm and suffering. But heedfulness also means that you don’t underestimate things. On the one hand, you don’t underestimate the dangers that are there if you don’t train the mind. But then you also don’t underestimate the good that you’ve done and the good that can be done. Always have confidence in that, because that is the message of the Buddha’s awakening. The goodness we do is not wasted. And whether it shows its results quickly or slowly, part of showing your results is learning how to appreciate goodness while you’re doing it. As the Buddha said, “Acts of merit.” That’s another name for happiness. Not so much that it causes happiness. The action itself is a happy action. So generosity is happy. Virtue is happy. Meditation is happy. Learn how to appreciate that kind of happiness. And you’ll find that the mind is more and more inclined to want to develop it even further. If all you can see is how little progress you’ve made, that spoils your mood for putting in any effort. You say, “Well, all this work I’ve done, it doesn’t show any progress. Why should I do any more work?” That’s a huge defilement, and it’s a huge obstacle. And it’s an obstacle you’re creating. What you want to do is look back on progress you have made. Sometimes it’s hard to see because it’s gradual. But it’s there. So learn to take heart. That, in and of itself, is a good way of fighting off your defilements. Because they want to defeat you. And when you take on the mood that this is going nowhere, this is awfully slow, you’re siding with them. You have to realize they’re not your friends. Your real friends are the voices of encouragement that you can muster up inside.

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