Making Yourself Worthy of Trust

November 7, 2022

When we take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, there’s both the external refuge and the internal refuge. The internal refuge, of course, is the more important. The external refuge, the Buddha would be the Prince Siddhartha who gained awakening 2,600 years ago. The Dhamma would be the Dhamma in the books, the Dhammatalks. The Sangha would be the monastic Sangha, ideally the Sangha of the noble ones. And their refuge is in the sense that they give us good examples that this is how happiness is found. We all want happiness. We want it so much you’d think that people would actually be serious about how they go about it. Not serious in a grim way, but really put some thought into it. You look around, see who really is happy, and how did they get there? All too often we simply go by our impulses. And if there’s something so important, you can’t just take your impulses as a guide. You want to see other people who’ve acted in certain ways and what have been the long-term consequences of their actions. And the Buddha and the Dhamma and the Sangha give us the best examples that this is how happiness is found. Happiness is found in a way that’s harmless. If you want your happiness to last, you have to not only think about the long-term, that’s the wise part, but also you have to think about how your happiness is going to have an impact on other people. That’s where compassion comes in. Your happiness depends on their suffering. They’re not going to stand for it. They’ll do what they can to destroy your happiness. There’s a scene in the canon where King Vasanthi is in his private apartments with his favorite queen, Mallika. And in a tender moment he turns to her and asks her, Mallika, is there anyone you love more than yourself? And you know what he’s thinking. She’ll say, yes, Your Majesty, you. But that’s not what she says. She says no. There’s nobody I love more than myself, and what about you? Anybody you love more than yourself? And the king has to admit it. No, there’s nobody he loves more than himself. That’s the end of that scene. So the king goes down to see the Buddha and tells him what happened. And the Buddha says, you know, she’s right. You could search the whole world over and wouldn’t find anybody that you love more than yourself. In the same way, other people and other beings love themselves just as fiercely as you do. So that’s the conclusion the Buddha draws from that, is that you shouldn’t harm anybody or get them to do harm. And then we look at the Sangha. They carried through with the Buddha’s instructions. They saw ways in which their actions were not in line with his instructions, and they changed their ways of acting. They’re following the instructions, but also learning how to gauge the results of their actions for themselves, to see where they’re doing harm. If they’re thinking of a harmful intention, they could ask themselves, okay, what’s going to happen as a result of this intention? If they saw that it would cause harm, they’d say, no, don’t go there. You didn’t foresee any harm. Go ahead and do it. While you’re acting, look to see what your immediate consequences are, because sometimes actions do show their consequences right away. If you’re causing harm, stop. You don’t see any harm, keep on going. When the action is done, look at the long-term consequences. And if it turns out you did cause harm, take that as a lesson. Talk it over with someone else who’s more advanced on the path, and then make up your mind that you’re not going to repeat that mistake ever again. If you didn’t see any harm, you could take joy in the fact that you’re progressing on the path. If you like the action or not like the action, the question is, what are the consequences going to be? And you want to avoid harm. This is how you develop purity. And there you have the three main virtues of the Buddha: wisdom, compassion, purity, in your search for happiness. So you internalize their examples. That’s where the inner refuge comes in. You train the mind to be reliable. Because you start out with a mind that’s partly reliable and partly not. And John Shaw used to like to say, one of the first things you learn about the mind as you come to train it is how much it lies to itself. But it’s not just a liar. After all, it did bring you here. You do have some skillful potentials. And a large part of the practice is learning how to sort them out, which parts of the mind are skillful and which ones are not. That test of putting things into action. That’s one of the best ways of sorting these things out. It applies not only outside but also inside. After all, training the mind is a type of action. In fact, it’s the most important. As the Buddha said, after the three types of action: bodily, verbal, mental, mental is the most important because it guides the other two. And you learn how to make the mind trust whether you set up an intention that you know is good, the intention to train the mind, the intention to be with the body in the present moment so you get the mind to settle down in good, solid concentration. And try to maintain that intention. And you’ll see that other intentions come banging into it. And so for the time being, you’ll see those other intentions are not for you to follow. They’re reasons why you have to think about this, think about that. You’re being irresponsible if you don’t worry about this. You tell yourself, “Whatever happens in the world, good or bad, I’m going to have to be mindful, alert, and discerning. Where am I going to get those qualities if I don’t meditate?” Because even when good things happen, you have to be mindful around them so you don’t get carried away and careless. When unskillful thoughts come up in the mind, you have to learn how to recognize them for what they are. That’s one of the functions of mindfulness. Mindfulness isn’t just accepting whatever comes up. It means keeping something in mind. In this case, you keep in mind what you know is the right path, what you know is the wrong path, what you know is skillful, what you know is not skillful. You hold onto that. And then you judge things as to whether they’re skillful or not. If they’re not skillful, they’re not going to cause harm. If they’re unskillful, they’ll cause harm. And then you have to start dealing with the areas where you’re not sure. And this is where you have to think things through. And even after thinking things through, testing them against the Dharma, you’re still not sure, go ahead and try. But really be honest with yourself about the consequences. This principle of honesty is so important that the Buddha said it’s what he looked for in a student. One is that the student be observant, and two is that the student be honest. Those are the two qualities you want to bring. And you’ll find that the mind has its dishonesties. But as long as you can identify them as the mind lying to itself, you’re fine. Now, there will be times, of course, when the mind lies very effectively. It sounds like the Dharma. It’s the same Christianity that even the devil can quote scripture. Even your defilements can quote Dharma to you. But when you’re not sure, experiment. Give it a try. But for the time being, as you’re getting the mind to settle down and be still, have some respect for your concentration. We’re all too quick to want to get the concentration to go where we want it to. If we want deep concentration, we want to squeeze it toward deep concentration. If we want insights, we want to squeeze the concentration to insights. Give it some space. Let it develop. Let it seep. The Buddha’s image is of a bathman mixing water with bath powder. Back in those days, they didn’t have soap. The way we have it now, they’d have a kind of a soap powder. You’d mix it with water, and then you’d have a soap dough that you would rub over your body. In the same way that when you’re making bread, you combine the flour with the water, so it’s just right. It’s not dripping in, but they’re not dripping out. There’s no dry spots in the flour. In the same way, the Buddha said, as you meditate, try to breathe in a way that feels comfortable. Then he’d ask us about what ways are comfortable. You’d try it, experimenting. Try long breathing for a while. Try short breathing for a while. Deep, shallow, heavy, light. Any combination of those. See what feels good right now. Or you can just ask the body in the present moment. What kind of breathing do you want now? See how the body responds. Or you can make a survey around the body. Think of the body as having breath everywhere in the body. Ask yourself, where does it feel like there’s no breath? Can I have the metal image of the whole body breathing, every cell in the body breathing in, breathing out together? What does that do? On the one hand, you learn some interesting lessons about the power of perception. The way you perceive the breath energy flowing through the body is going to have an impact on how you actually breathe. For the time being, though, the main question is, what way feels really good? Once you’ve got a breath rhythm that feels good, how do you maintain it? Maintaining it means, on the one hand, as long as this rhythm feels good, you maintain it. When it doesn’t feel good anymore, you can change. Because the needs of the body will change as the mind settles down. So you get to play, you get to experiment, you get to choose what kind of breathing you like. And then think of the breath spreading through that whole body, the comfortable breath, the easeful breath, the refreshing breath, like that bathman spreading the water through the door, working it through any parts where it’s not comfortable. It’s not going easily. In other words, there will be patterns of tension in the body that seem to resist and put up walls or blockages. But remind yourself, the breath can go through anything. It’s an energy. Hold that perception in mind. And remind yourself also that the breath was there first. See what that perception does. And you may ask yourself, can I trust these perceptions? As long as they make the breath comfortable, they’re fine. And then give the mind some time to settle in. This will become the foundation for insight. But as with any foundation, you want to make sure it’s solid. If it’s not solid, you build one story on top of it and it falls down. Any story is on top as you like. So show some patience. Show some respect for your concentration. And if your concentration seems weak, don’t throw it away. Just stay with it. Strong concentration comes from gluing together moments of weak concentration. So as you wither breath for a little bit and wander off, tell yourself, no, don’t wander. Come right back. Set yourself as quickly as possible. Or if the mind has a tendency to stay with one in-breath and one out-breath and then to leave before the next breath happens, say, can I make it to two breaths? Can I make it to three, four? Build slowly. Again, show some respect. This is a skill that’s worth developing, worth spending time. Then when the mind does settle down, say, okay, now is the time to settle down. It’s a different skill from getting it to settle down. Getting it there is one thing. Getting it to stay is something else. Because there will be impulses in the mind. Say, okay, enough of this. What’s next? And you have to say, nope, this is what’s next. If this is going to grow, it has to be given time. It’s like a cream that you put on a rash. You don’t put the cream on and then wipe it off. You put it on and let it stay. And the insight that comes as you’re trying to get it to stay will be insights into the mind’s antsiness, its desire to move on to something else. The Lord will tell you that this is stupid. Nothing’s happening in the mind. It’s not stupid at all. You’re learning an important skill. But it’s a skill that we tend to overlook in our society. The skill of a quiet mind. So give us some space. And as we’re living here together, give some space to one another’s concentration as well. We don’t take a vow of silence here in this temporary monastery. When you have something you have to talk about, talk about it. But remind yourself, okay, every time you open your mouth, you may be disturbing somebody else’s concentration. So make sure that when you speak, it’s worth the disturbance. And the more you respect other people’s concentration, the more you’ll be likely to respect your own. And if you’re not quite sure about whether what you’re experiencing is breath energy or not, say, well, that’s good enough. If it’s my sensation of how the body feels right now, it qualifies. And as you settle in, okay, you’ll learn more and more about the breath. You’ll learn more and more about the mind. Things will change. But give it some trust that if it’s not quite right yet, it’ll lead you to what’s right. I mean, this is how the path develops. Nobody starts out totally right on the path. You’re a little bit right. You’re halfway between right and wrong. And you’re leaning towards right. So as long as you’re alert, as long as you’re honest and observant, you can trust that whatever you’re holding on to will develop into concentration and you’ll be able to seek. And where it’s not quite right, you can adjust it. And where it’s not quite right again, you can adjust it. And that’s how this skill develops. And this is how the practice grows.

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