Capable

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There’s a story in the canon where Jitta, a householder, is dying. And Dave has come to see him and tell him, “Set your mind on becoming a universal monarch.” And he asked him, “Why do you say that?” They said they had two reasons. One was they saw that he was a virtuous person and it would be good to have a virtuous person in a position of power. In the world. The second reason was because he was a virtuous person, whatever determination he made in his mind would be bound to come true. Now he rejected their advice. He said he wanted something higher than being a universal monarch. After all, he was a non-returner. He wasn’t going to come back to the human world. But because of what the Dave has said, it’s become a tradition. And the Buddha’s teaching said, “If you make merit”—the Dave was limited to the people who make merit by being virtuous, but other people have expanded to include making merit through generosity—“then you can make a determination. You can dedicate the merit to a particular result that you would like to see.” Now John Fung didn’t recommend that his students do that. He said, “Trust in the practice that you’re doing. If you’re doing the practice well, the results will have to be good.” But there was one time that someone gave him a book on King Ashoka. And part of the book, as he said, that he liked the most was a brief statement that toward the end of his life King Ashoka said all the merit that he had made in his gifts to the Sangha. He didn’t want to dedicate it to becoming a king ever again. What he did want was capability within himself. In other words, enough knowledge and enough skill to be able to depend on himself wherever he went. That kind of dedication, as John Fung said, was worthwhile. Because what it means is you want to master the Buddhist teachings as a skill. And you’re willing to develop the qualities of the mind that can make you a reliable person, so that no matter where you go you don’t need to rely on other people. You have your own inner integrity that you can depend on. Now the qualities that make you dependable like this, of course, are the four bases for success. Desire, persistence, intent, and ingenuity. And so it’s good to think about how you develop these qualities of mind and heart as you’re practicing. You start out with desire. We’re told so many times that desire is the cause for suffering, but it’s also part of the path to the end of suffering. Under right effort, the Buddha says, you have to generate desire to develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones. In other words, the path works best if you can convince yourself that you want to do it. This involves talking to yourself in the right way. That’s for the parts of the mind that don’t want to do the path, that find it hard to do the path. You have to ask yourself why you’re listening to them. They’re just creating trouble for you. They talk to themselves in unskillful ways. Well, you can talk to yourself in skillful ways. The important thing about desire is you focus it on the causes and not so much on the results. Results, of course, are there in the back of the mind, but you realize if you just focus on the results, it’s kind of a floating desire that doesn’t accomplish anything. If you focus your desires on the causes, that you want to succeed in the causes, the results will have to come. Our desire right now is to get the mind to settle down. That’s what you do to get the mind to settle down. The Buddha gives his instructions in his description of right mindfulness. You keep focused on the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. So you stay with the breath. That’s part of the body. And it’s those three qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency that are going to make the difference. Mindfulness is the ability to keep in mind what you want to do. And what you should be doing. Alertness is what watches what’s actually going on. What you’re actually doing in the present moment. Are you sticking with your original intent or not? And if you’re not, bring the mind right back. If you are, try to be as sensitive as possible. This is where you bring in the ardency. You’re trying to do this well. Now these three qualities, this is the one that John Lee focused on as being the one where that involves the discernment. You realize that to have happiness is not going to come simply by sitting here waiting for it to come, or simply accepting things as they are. There are things that have to be developed. There are things that have to be abandoned. You see that, you realize that. And so you realize that you’re going to get the most out of these teachings only if you put them into practice. That’s genuine discernment, genuine wisdom. And you just keep at it. Anything unskillful comes up, you learn how to let go of it. Anything skillful that hasn’t come around yet or is still very weak, you try to strengthen it. That’s where the persistence comes in. And as long as the results aren’t what you want, you keep at it. But in keeping at it, you don’t just push, push, push. There’s an example in the Canon of someone who wants to get milk out of a cow. He twists the cow’s horn. Of course, you’re not going to get any milk. But you think about it. Sometimes you’re twisting the cow’s horn. You think, “Well, maybe I’m not twisting hard enough or long enough with enough force.” That kind of persistence is not right persistence. It’s blind. You want the kind of persistence that says, “Well, maybe I’m doing something wrong here. What else could I do instead?” In the case of the cow, you see that it has an udder. You pull on the udder and you get the milk. Some people would say, “Well, why don’t you just give up? Stop twisting the horn and then you’ll be fine. You won’t be harassing the cow. You won’t be wasting any effort.” You’re not wasting any effort, but you’re not getting the milk that you want. When you pull on the udder, then you get the milk. That’s what persistence is about. It’s making your effort right and focusing in the right place, doing the right things, and being happy to do this. Seeing it as your sport. All too often we identify with our defilements and we get upset when our defilements get thwarted. But maybe it would be good to change your allegiance. These defilements are like false friends, the kind of friends who get you to break the law. And then when the police come, they go running away, leaving you with the stolen goods. You’re the one who gets punished. In other words, the defilements can get you to do things that are going to cause you to suffer. They’re not suffering at all. You’re the one who suffers and yet you believe them. So change your allegiance. This requires that third basis for success, which is intent. You really give your full attention to what you’re doing, full attention to what the results are. You’re not just going through the motions. You put your whole heart into this. Give the breath one hundred percent of your attention. Because after all, it’s all around you, wherever your focus is located in the body. There’s breath in front of it, breath to the left, breath to the right, breath behind, above and below. You can think of the whole body as being breath. This way you give the mind one object and an object that fills your whole awareness. That’s the quality you’re looking for in the concentration. And then you contemplate it. This is where that fourth quality comes in, which is translated usually as discrimination or ingenuity. Ajahn Lee translates it as circumspection. You look all around what you’re doing to see if the results are really good all around. If there’s anything lacking, you make up for the lack. Try to figure out what the lack is, how you can make up for it. This is where you’ll have to learn how to depend on yourself. You think about the Ajahns living on the forest. They had two big problems. One is sometimes visions would come in their meditation. And they’d have to figure out, “Is this something I can believe or not? And exactly how much of it should I believe?” Ajahn Mun gave a basic principle, which is that if something comes up you’re not sure about, just stay with your sense of simple awareness. Don’t brand the vision as true or false. Just say, “This vision is there. Let it pass.” You can protect yourself from a lot of things in that way. The other thing, of course, is they come up and their mind will not settle down. They’ve got a problem. There’s nobody they can run to to get advice from. So they’ve got to use their own ingenuity. The mind likes to settle down. How can I give that to the mind? Where is that potential in the body right now? The Buddha talks about finding a sense of rapture, refreshment, a sense of ease in the body. Well, where is that sense of ease right now? Or is there something that I’m doing that’s hiding it? Can I breathe in a way that doesn’t hide those things, that doesn’t create unnecessary tension? So you use your ingenuity. See, if the problem is with the mind, the problem is with the breath. And try to figure out ways of changing things so you get better results. It’s in this way that you learn how to depend on yourself. You get better and better at reading the mind. And when things come up, there are two principles that the Ajahns recommend. One is that if something comes up and says, “This is this and that’s that,” you have to ask yourself, “To what extent is that true? And to what extent is it false? Where is the opposite of that insight? Where would that be true? Under what conditions?” Because a lot of the insights that come up are specifically for particular situations. But if you try to memorize them and apply them to everything, you can often create more trouble for yourself. So you have to ask yourself, “What are the limits of this particular insight?” The other thing they recommend is when an insight arises, watch what happens right after it arises in the mind. Is there any pride that comes up? Any kind of defilement that can come up around the insight, watch out for that. So your intent and your circumspect. This is how you learn how to depend on yourself, how you develop a capability within yourself. So that wherever you happen to be, you have within you the resources for coming out safe and sound. Because we live in this world. There are dangers all around us and there are dangers inside the mind. So we have to figure out how to keep ourselves safe. That’s how we develop this ability within ourselves. What it comes down to is you train yourself to be your own teacher when a problem comes up in the mind. First question is, if the teacher were around, what would he or she say? And if you can think of something the teacher said that’s relevant, okay, apply it. If it turns out it doesn’t work, you say, “Okay, now what else might be possible?” That way you develop your own ability to be a teacher inside. This is how the Jhans were able to teach others, because they had to learn how to teach themselves. This is how they could see through other people’s defilements, because they had to learn how to see through their own defilements. When your wisdom and discernment are independent in this way, that’s when you have full capability within yourself. No matter where you go, you’re safe. You’re fine. And John Lee, in a discussion of the Seven Noble Treasures one time, said that of the seven, the most important is discernment. He said if you have discernment, the other ones are there in the discernment. And no matter where you may happen to be reborn, if you’re reborn only with a single machete, you can still set yourself up in life. There are a lot of people out there who’ve made a lot of donations, a lot of merit in that direction, but with that much discernment, their wealth, their prosperity could actually come back and destroy them, because they don’t have the discernment to use it well. So work on developing your discernment, which is basically your ability to reflect on your actions and the results. Figure out what’s going well, what’s not going well, if it’s going well, how do you maintain it? If it’s not going well, what do you do to change, to get better results? That kind of discernment is the discernment that can really help you all the time. We hear so much about the discernment of the Buddha in terms of emptiness and dependent origination, but those teachings count as discernment only if you know how to use them wisely. And you’re sense of how to use them wisely has to do with a sense of how to use simpler things wisely, simpler principles, like what’s skillful, what’s not skillful, how do you abandon what’s unskillful, how you develop what is skillful. You start with those questions, and then by the time you reach issues around emptiness or dependent co-arising, you’ll know what to do with them, because you will have developed a capability within yourself. So if you’re going to dedicate your practice to anything, dedicate it to that.

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