A Robust Heart

January 9, 2024

There’s a questionnaire for young novices in the Canon called “Novices’ Questions,” and it deals with basic concepts. What is one? What is two? What is three? All the way up to what is ten? What is four, for example, is the four nipple truths. Five is the five aggregates. Six is the six sense spheres. The most interesting one is one is one. And the answer is all beings subsist on food. Food here means both physical food and mental food. This is what we all have in common. We need to feed. Once you take on the identity as a being, that being needs nourishment. For the most part, we look for nourishment in bad places, places where our food source is always in danger. In other words, we look outside. One of Buddha’s most important teachings is that we can actually generate food inside, so the world doesn’t have to press in on us. We can radiate good energy out based on our own internal source of food, our own internal source of energy. As we’re meditating, that’s what we’re doing. We’re trying to develop good food inside. There are five qualities that allow us to do that. It’s good to keep them in mind. Because as you stay here in the monastery or you leave the monastery, the affairs of the world can impinge on you. Even in the monastery, the world can pinch the monastery. If some idiot decides it’s time for war, okay, we’re going to suffer. So we have to look inside for our food. Think of that chant we had just now, “The world is swept away, it does not endure.” There’s nothing really solid out there you can depend on. Yet, for the most part, we keep coming back to it. We’re slaves to craving. The story goes that those contemplations were the reasons why a young monk who came from a wealthy family had cancer. He still decided he wanted to ordain. A king who knew him questioned him about this. “Why did you ordain?” And he gave those reasons. In the course of it, he asked the king, “Are you as strong as you used to be?” “Well, no.” When he was young, he had superhuman strength, he felt. But now he means to put his foot in one place and go someplace else. He’s 80 years old. The question is, “What does it mean that the world has no shelter, has no one in charge?” Of course, the king was piqued by that. But then again, the monk asked him, “When you’re sick and your courtiers think you’re about to die, and they’re sitting around, it actually sounds like they’re hoping you die, can you take out this pain and share it among them and say, ‘May you feel some of this pain so I don’t have to feel all of it?’ Well, no, you can’t do that. You’ve got to feel all your pain by yourself.” The world has nothing of its own. Again, the king had his storerooms, but the monk asked him, “Can you take them with you when you die?” “Well, no, they stay here.” Teachings on aging, illness, death, inconstancy, stress, not-self. Now what about being a slave to craving? The king didn’t want him to be called a slave. But the young monk asked him, “Suppose someone were to say they were to have a kingdom to the east, and its armies are weak, and you could defeat them and have lots of wealth. Would you go for it?” “Sure.” Here he is, eighty years old. He’s been asked to reflect on the fact that he can’t take anything with him, and he’s about to die. But he still would go for another kingdom. “How about one to the south, north, west? How about one across the ocean?” “Sure, sure, sure.” This is what happens when we’re looking for our nourishment outside. It’s unsatisfactory, and yet we keep coming back. What we need is to find an independent source inside. And we can create it, and we can make it independent. It’s not totally independent. We depend on the Buddhist teachings to show us the way. But otherwise, we’ve got to generate the energy from inside. Otherwise, the affair of the world comes crowding in and squeezes us. We’re like plants that grow in tiny crevices. They get squeezed all out of shape. We need to generate energy so that we can create our space and make it a good space. So what are the qualities that strengthen us? There’s conviction. Technically, there’s conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. But what does that mean for us? It means that there’s someone who found, through his own efforts, that he can put an end to suffering. It tells you something about the power of action. As I said, he found this through developing qualities of hatefulness, resolution, and ardency. These are qualities that we all have to some extent, but that we often neglect. We live in a consumer society and we’re constantly thinking about what we can take in and take in. There’s that New Yorker cartoon where two couples are sitting in the living room and the husband or wife is saying, “Of course it’s had its ups and downs, but by and large Margaret and I have found the consumer experience to be a rewarding one.” That’s blindness. You consume and consume, and then you get too old to consume and they throw you away. We have to think instead about what we can produce. As Ajahn Lee mentions, we learn the Dhamma from others, we consume the Buddha’s knowledge, we consume the Buddha’s wisdom, the wisdom of the Ajahns. But there comes a point where we have to produce our own Dhamma. In other words, come up with solutions on our own for the problems that face us. And we can do it. We’re not limited to just what the Buddha said. We take his principles and we learn how to apply them. A while back I was asked about the teachings that Ajahn Suat repeated the most. One of them was practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. “How about Ajahn Phuong?” I was asked. He’d constantly talk about being observant in your meditation and using your ingenuity. It might seem like those are cross-purposes. Practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma seems to mean that you simply follow what you’re taught. Ingenuity requires that you be more inventive. But the Buddha himself set the example. He was inventive in the way he presented his teachings. He encouraged others to be inventive as well, taking the basic principles of the Dhamma that he taught and applying them. So conviction means that you can look inside, in your own mind, and there are resources in there that you can develop. And you believe that those resources really can make a difference. You’re more likely to take advantage of them. That’s why conviction is listed as a strength and as a form of wealth, as a form of protection. So that the world outside doesn’t come squeezing you out, you can push out in the other direction and push out with something positive. The second source of strength is persistence. You really stick with this. The practice isn’t something you do only on holidays or only on retreats. All too often we think about the practice as something we try to fit into our daily lives. Think about it the other way around. How do you fit your daily life into your practice? Make your practice the container. So you’re constantly looking at ways of abandoning anything unskillful that comes up in the mind and developing skillful things in its place. That requires the third source, which is mindfulness, your ability to keep the teachings in mind, keep in mind the lessons you’ve learned, and always remember to apply them. When you do that, you get the strength that comes from concentration. This is the difference. Strength is the food. Concentration here is not talking about a very narrow, pinned-down state of mind. It’s more expansive. Think of concentration being like concentric circles. You’ve got your focus here in the body, but your awareness is broad. The Buddha talks about breathing in and out aware of the whole body. He talks about taking whatever sense of ease you can develop by focusing on the breath and letting it fill the whole body. Whatever sense of refreshment or rapture, let it fill the whole body. That gives you the strength you’re going to need. As the Buddha said, when you practice restraint of the senses, this is one of the ways in which you’re persistent. You notice that if you look at things in a certain way, it gives rise to lust. Well, don’t look at them in that way. Look at them in another way. But there’s a part of the mind that wants to get some pleasure out of them. Learn to find your pleasure in not giving in to the lust or not giving in to anger. See those abilities as pleasurable. But they’re going to require sustenance. They’re going to require food. This is what concentration provides. Finally, there’s discernment. You see clearly for yourself what is skillful and what is not. You start out by borrowing, as I said, the Buddha’s discernment and leaning on his discernment. But you’ve got to develop your own ability to see what the Buddha said really is true. On the one hand, yes, unskillful qualities do lead to suffering. Skillful qualities, when you act on them, lead to well-being. And you can get so skillful that you can find something deathless inside. That’s possible, too. And the belief in that possibility brings us back to conviction. It gets us to the point where your conviction is actually confirmed. In other words, you find, yes, there is a deathless quality in the mind that you can contact through the practice. That’s when your strengths really become solid. The image the Buddha gives is of building a house. You put up the rafters for the roof. At first the rafters are kind of swaying around, but then you put a ridgepole in and you connect the rafters to the ridgepole. Then they become solid. They support one another. So keep reminding yourself that the best source of food, the best source of energy, is inside. It’s only a matter of having conviction that, yes, it is there. Then you have the ability to develop the resources needed to find nourishment there. That’s why you’re not constantly trying to bring things in from outside. You find that they disappoint. You’re producing things and sending energy out so the mind can be robust. It doesn’t have to get squeezed out of shape. You may have seen those plants. You pull them out and say they’ve been growing in between bricks or growing through cracks in the sidewalk. They have these weird shapes. Is it because they’ve been forced by outside forces to eat a little bit of nourishment out of the soil, a little bit of nourishment out of the water that comes through them? Compare those to plants that can grow in an environment where they’re not squeezed in, where the plant can actually push out its energy. It’s more robust. You want your mind to be robust like that. If it’s robust in that way, then it can live in this world and not be crowded by the world. So learn to look for your energy inside. You do have this independent source of energy here. We’re sometimes told that the idea of an independent self is one of the worst things we can have. It’s actually one of the best. It directs us in the right direction for where we’re going to find our nourishment. Because we live in a world, as I said, that’s swept away. It’s a slave to craving. And the things that we depend on outside are subject to forces that are way beyond our control. So we have to turn around and look inside and gain some control inside, gain some control inside, gain some strength, gain well-being, get fully nourished so that our minds can remain robust, our hearts can remain robust. We don’t have to fear all the things that could happen to our sources of food outside, because we’ve got a good source inside.

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