Training for Dispassion

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Once, in the time of the Buddha, there were some monks who were going to go to a part of India that had never had any monks go there before. So they went to say goodbye to the Buddha, pay their respects. He said, “Have you paid your respects to Venerable Sariputta?” They hadn’t. So he recommended that they do it. So they went and paid their respects. He asked them, “What does your teacher teach? What are you going to say?” They said, “We’ve come from a long way to hear what you would say.” So he started with an interesting sentence. He said, “Our teacher teaches the end of desire and passion, chandra raga.” Then he went on to say that because the people in that area are intelligent, the next question they would ask would be, “Passion and desire for what?” That shows the difference between people then and people now. Most people now would change the channel, switch to another window on their iPad. But if you’re intelligent you want to know, “Why would the Buddha teach that?” Ending of passion and desire. “Passion and desire for what?” Then Sariputta answered, “There’d be passion and desire for the five aggregates, form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness.” Then the next question those people would ask would be, “Why?” Because if you haven’t abandoned desire and passion for those things, then when they change, there’s going to be sorrow and lamentation. But if you haven’t abandoned desire and passion, then when those things change there wouldn’t be any sorrow and lamentation at all. He went on to say that if by abandoning unskillful qualities you met with pain and suffering, both short-term and long-term, then the Buddha wouldn’t have taught to abandon unskillful qualities. And by developing skillful qualities, you wouldn’t experience happiness, long-term happiness. And the Buddha wouldn’t have taught that either. He tells you something about his motivation. His motivation is for the sake of happiness. In fact, he talks often about how the abandoning of desire and passion is the ending of a fetter. We’re bound to things that make us suffer. But to abandon with regard to things that are inconstant, stressful, and not-self, he’d said, “Passion and desire.” So you’re not abandoning the five aggregates. You’re abandoning your passion and desire for them. This goes very much against the grain. After all, we like our passions, we like our desires. That’s why we are passionate about them, why we desire them. But it goes deeper than that. As the Buddha said, “All phenomena are rooted in desire.” So all our experience of things with the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind, all our experience of the five aggregates, is rooted in desire. And the Buddha wants us to put an end to that desire. So it goes very much against the grain. Which means that if we’re sitting or meditating, we’re not simply following our innate nature, or allowing our innate nature to unfold and express itself, reveal itself. There are a lot of things that are going to go against the grain, which means we have to train ourselves. A large part of that training depends on the Buddha and the words we’ve learned from him, the words we’ve learned from the Ajahns. As he said, the whole of the holy life is admirable friendship. But that doesn’t mean that the admirable friend is going to do the work for us. It’s simply that our admirable friend is showing us, through their qualities of discernment, virtue, relinquishment, conviction, that these things are possible and they can lead to happiness. A happiness that we might not have imagined otherwise. So we depend on them to open these possibilities to us. But at the same time, we have to be up for the task. We have to bring qualities that will enable us to take on a training like this. Some of these qualities we all have. As the Buddha said for everyone, the principle of causality is that what you’re experiencing right now is a combination of three things. The results of past actions, your current actions, and the results of your current actions. If causality didn’t work this way, then you wouldn’t be able to learn from your own experience. Say, if everything were totally determined from the past, what would you learn? You’d just be experiencing the result of something that you likely couldn’t remember. But the fact that some of the things you’re experiencing right now come from what you’re doing right now you can experiment with your breath. You can breathe in a long way or a short way, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow, any combination of those, and you’ll see results. And you can decide, based on those results, which combination is best. That’s how you learn. Another quality you bring is the fact that the mind is luminous. Sometimes that’s interpreted as meaning that the mind is innately pure. But the Buddha never said that. He says it’s because the mind is luminous that it can be trained. I.e., you can train your own mind because you can watch what’s going on in your mind. You can see what’s going on in your mind. In terms of your actions and the results, things we tend to ignore. But without that luminous quality, that quality of just knowing what’s going on, it allows us to see what we’re doing, see what we’re doing that’s skillful, what’s unskillful, and we can make changes. Try things out. So those qualities we all have. But the Buddha asked for more. As he said when he wanted, a student to come, he said, “Let someone come who is honest and observant, and I’ll teach that person the Dhamma.” You’re taking advantage of this luminous quality of the mind, and you’re learning to bring your powers of observation inward. The honesty, of course, is when you want to learn something, you have to be honest about what you did and what the results are. Because without that quality of honesty, how would you learn? You come up with all kinds of theories that are not related to what’s actually happening, not related to the results of what you’re doing. So these are the qualities the Buddha asks that you bring. Honesty and the ability to be observant. And then he recommends how you train. Those instructions to Rahula when Rahula was seven are a primary example of how you develop your honesty and how you develop your powers of observation. They’re also an example of how the Buddha would motivate you to want to take on this training. You probably know the story. Rahula sees the Buddha coming from the distance, so he sets out a jar of water with a tipper. The Buddha takes the water in the tipper, washes his feet, leaves a little bit of water in the tipper, then asks Rahula, “Do you see how little water there is there?” Rahula says, “Yes.” The Buddha says, “That’s how little there is to the quality of a contemplative and someone who tells a deliberate lie with no sense of shame.” That may have been the case that Rahula had told a lie that day, so you can imagine how he felt. Then the Buddha takes the water and throws it away. He says, “Do you see how that water has been thrown away?” “Yes.” “That’s how it happens to the quality of a contemplative who tells a deliberate lie with no sense of shame. It gets thrown away just like that.” Then he says, “See how empty this tipper is?” “Well, yes.” “Yes, yes.” Then he turns the tipper upside down. “See how it’s turned upside down?” “Yes.” He’s trying to incite in Rahula the desire to be a good contemplative and to develop the quality of honesty, regardless of how much he might have wanted to tell lies. So what all of this comes down to is we’ve got to train ourselves. There’s just a lot that needs to be changed inside. We’re not here just to accept or just to be equanimous about what arises. We have to change our attitudes. We develop good qualities in the place. That’s when the Buddha taught Rahula how to be observant. He said, “Observe your intentions.” If you anticipate that an intention, if you followed it, would lead to any harm for yourself or others, you don’t follow it. And the question that he has for Rahula, or a phrase in asking that question is, “This action that I want to act on, what would be the results?” There’s the “I” there. And it plays an important part. After all, if you’re self-training, you have to have a clear sense of you’re being responsible for what you’re doing and you’re responsible for changing what you’re doing. If you don’t anticipate any harm, you go ahead and do the action. While you’re doing it, you watch the results. And if, while you’re doing it, some bad results come up, harming yourself or others, you stop. And again, the question is, “Is this action that I am doing?” You’re responsible for what you’re doing. If you don’t see any harm, you continue with the action until it’s done, and then you look at the long-term results. The question, “This action that I have done, did it cause any harm?” If you saw that it caused harm, you go talk it over with someone else, and you develop a sense of shame around what you’ve done. Shame, not in the debilitating sense that you’re a bad person, but simply that that action was beneath you. And you learn from this other person who is more advanced on the path as to how you might avoid that in the future. If you don’t see that you caused any harm, then you take delight in the fact that your training is progressing. This, the Buddha said, is how you purify yourself. How everybody who has purified themselves has done it. So here he’s teaching you how to be observant, and what to be observant about. Your intentions, your actions, and their results. That’s where you’re going to learn how to put an end to desire and passion. Because since you begin to see, by acting on certain desires and passions, you’re creating harm, so you stop. As John Lee would put it, you learn how to abandon what’s unskillful and develop what’s skillful. And then you finally move on to abandoning even what is skillful. A lot of us want to go right to the end there and say, “Well, I’ll just abandon all actions, abandon all sense that I’m doing anything.” That aborts the process. There are stages you have to go through. You have to be responsible. You have to learn how to develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones, because this is how you learn about passion and desire. You realize that some of your passions and desires really are harmful. And so you want to go beyond them. That desire to go beyond them is not something to be abandoned right away. You develop it. So you learn about passion and desire by developing good passions and desires and abandoning bad ones. Like right now, as you’re getting the mind into concentration, there will be thoughts that come up that wander away from the breath. And for the time being, nothing but thoughts about the breath are relevant right now. So any desires that would pull you away from the breath, you’ve got to say “no” to them. And it’s in saying “no” that you learn about them. The Buddha gives the example of mindfulness cutting off your unskillful thoughts. He says it doesn’t totally cut them off. Mindfulness is like building a dam. It stops these things. And then the current is cut through discernment. But first you’ve got to learn how to say “no.” You’ve got to learn how to stop them. Because in learning how to stop them, you learn a lot about their tricks. And after all, our passions and desires go so deep that they create our sense of who we are, what’s been important in our lives. And they’re not going to go away easily. They’re going to find their ways of insinuating themselves into your practice. Like the idea that we’re not here to put an end to our cravings, we’re here just to watch them and accept them. That’s your cravings talking to you. That’s their version of the Dharma. So you’ve got to be careful. You’ve got to learn how to say “no” and see what they do. In the same way that building a dam across the river teaches you an awful lot about the currents that go under the surface of the river, saying “no” to unskillful desires teaches you a lot about the undercover currents of the mind. So what we’re doing right now is training ourselves. We’re taking sides inside. We’re taking that determination to find the true happiness that comes when our desires and passions no longer rule our lives. We’re going to make that determination foremost. Any other desires that go against that, we say “no.” As the Buddha sets out the proper determination, the determination for discernment, the determination for truth, the determination for relinquishment, and the determination for calm. And let desires for these things take charge. So there will be conflict in the mind as you practice. But it’s conflict for a purpose. It’s a conflict where you’re going to learn. It’s all about training, all about learning. After all, the Buddha called his teachings at one point “the triple training,” training in heightened virtue, heightened mind, and heightened discernment. He wasn’t setting out a view of reality that people would assent to or object to or argue with. He was setting out ways of thinking, ways of talking, ways of acting that would be helpful in training the mind in the right direction, to free it. I had a Zoom meeting this afternoon. That was one of the questions that came up. When the Buddha teaches dependent co-arising, it seems like he has different ways of explaining it. And the answer is yes, that’s true. He’s not there to say that there’s one way of understanding reality that’s in line with reality. There are lots of different ways, though, of thinking about what you’re doing, understanding what you’re doing, so you can counteract the passion and desire that would make you suffer. He’s like a teacher who sees that some ways of explaining, say, mathematics, would work for some people, but other ways would work for other people. He doesn’t force one way on everybody. He has lots of different approaches. They’re all ways of thinking, to take you to the point where you don’t have to think or say or do anything at all. The goal is that kind of radical goal, where everything gets taken apart. But to get there, you may require the Seven Factors for Awakening, you may require the Noble Eightfold Path, the Four Bases for Success, lots of different ways of understanding what you’re doing. So see what works. You may decide that one method makes a lot of sense to you, but after putting it into practice, it may not work. But there are alternative ways. The important thing is that you really learn to be honest, you really learn to be observant, and that’s what’s going to see you through. Without those two qualities, you can’t train yourself. With those two qualities, the training has a chance of succeeding.

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