Commit, Reflect, Discern

July 26, 2024

There’s a story in the Canon. Lady Vesaka, who was one of the Buddha’s main supporters, has come from the funeral of one of her grandchildren. She stops off to see the Buddha, and he asks her, “Would you like to have more grandchildren?” “Yes.” “Would you like to have as many grandchildren as there are people in the city of Savatthi?” That’s where she lived. And the answer again was, “Yes.” He said, “But is Savatthi ever without somebody dying in the course of a day?” She said, “No, there’s at least two people, three people. There’s never a day when there’s no death in Savatthi.” He said, “If you had that many grandchildren, you’d be going to a funeral every day.” So she said, “Well, enough of that idea. We live in a world where people are dying all the time. We got news this afternoon of a death in our extended family, one of our supporters from Thailand. And every time you hear about a death, the Buddha has you stop and think,”My body, too, is subject to that.” Now, this contemplation is not meant to get you depressed. It’s actually meant to fire you up, because you realize that you still have work to do before you go. If you want your death to be a good death, you’ve got to get your mind in shape. And that’s calm and peaceful. It’s when you leave this body, you go to a good place where you can continue practicing. This isn’t for most human beings. That’s not the case. The Buddha picked up some dirt under his fingernail one time and asked, “Which is more, the dirt on the earth or the dirt under my fingernail?” And the monk said, “Well, of course, the dirt on the earth is much more.” He said, “In the same way, those who pass away and go to one of the lower realms, it’s like the dirt on the earth. Those who pass away and come back to the human realm or to one of the higher realms, it’s like the dirt under my fingernail.” The whole purpose of these teachings is to get you to have a sense of strong sanghvega, that we really are in a very terrifying situation. But we also want to supplement that feeling with basada, with confidence that there is a way out. That’s the path that the Buddha provides. So when he has you reflect on death, it’s not just to think death, death, death. He says it’s for the purpose of finding the deathless. In other words, it motivates you to do the practices that lead to your experience of what’s deathless and to the mind. What we’re doing right now, practice in virtue, practice in concentration, practice in discernment. We reflect on these things, that things are inconstant, stressful, not-self, as we chanted just now. The fact that we’re subject to aging, illness, and death. Not to get depressed, but to motivate ourselves. To take on the training. The Buddha didn’t simply lay out a theory about what the world is like. He’s training people to develop themselves. And he gives advice from the outside. He also teaches us how to train ourselves. Part of the training, of course, is in this issue of motivation, making you want to take on the training. But he also gives you clear advice on how you can train yourself. It starts with the very simple principles like the teaching he gave to Rahula when Rahula was seven years old. He started out by emphasizing the importance of truthfulness. He says if you want to take on the contemplative life, you have to be the sort of person who would make a vow not to tell a deliberate lie, even in jest. And then building on that truthfulness, he would have you observe your actions and the results. You start out with your desire to act. And you ask yourself, when I want to do a particular action, what do I expect the results to be? And if you expect any harm, you don’t do it. If you don’t expect harm, you go ahead and do it. While you’re doing it, you look for the results that are coming up immediately, because the principle of causality is that not everything has to wait into another lifetime before it’s going to show its results. Sometimes you get results right away. You stick your finger in a fire and it burns right away. So if you look for any harm that may be coming up, and if you sense it, you stop. If you don’t sense any harm, you keep on going. When the action is done, you look at the long-term consequences. And if you see that you actually did cause harm, then you resolve not to repeat that mistake. You go and talk it over with someone else who’s more advanced in the path. Get some advice on how not to repeat the mistake. Then you have a sense of shame, a healthy sense of shame over what you’ve done. But you’re also resolved. You’re not going to repeat that mistake. If you don’t see any harm, then you take joy in that fact and keep on training. These are basic instructions on how to be a skillful person. If you’re going to master any kind of skill, you want to learn how to make pottery, you want to learn how to shoot a gun, you have to be very careful about what you want to do. And then do it as best you can. And then you look at the results. And if the results don’t measure up, you figure out what to do to change what you’re going to do the next time. So you approach your actions as a skill. This relates to the Buddhist teachings on avicca, or ignorance. As you said, this is the factor that can turn anything in the mind into a source of suffering. And the word avicca doesn’t mean just not knowing about things. It also means a lack of skill. You’re not skilled in the duties of the Four Noble Truths. You don’t know how to comprehend suffering well. You don’t know how to abandon its cause well. You don’t know how you can develop the path well. So there’s no way you’re going to realize the cessation of suffering at all. You’ve got to learn how to do these things well. And this is how you do it, through a process that the Buddha calls commitment and reflection. This applies to your actions outside, and it also applies to the meditation. As the Buddha said, he got on the right path when he learned to divide his thoughts into two sorts, those that would lead to harm, and those that wouldn’t. The ones that would lead to harm he would keep in check. The ones that wouldn’t lead to harm, he would allow to roam free for a while. He said it’s like a cow herd. During the rainy season when people are growing rice, the cow herd has to make sure that his cows don’t get into other people’s rice fields, because there’s going to be trouble if they do. So he has to beat them, hold them in check, anything that’s necessary to stop them. In the same way, if any unskillful thoughts came, no, based on sensuality, ill will, harmfulness, he’d beat them back. That tells you something right there. Buddhism is not about just accepting whatever. We’re here to develop a skill. And skill means making choices. It means having value judgments as to what’s worth fostering, what’s worth abandoning. As for when his thoughts were skillful, he would allow them free range like a cow herd who, during the dry season, doesn’t have to worry about his cows getting into anybody’s rice fields, because there’s no rice being grown. The rice has been harvested. The cows can wander pretty much where they like. He just has to be mindful of them. So when the time comes to take him back home at night, he gathers them in. So the skillful thoughts, he’d allow them to roam free, but he reflected also that if you think all day and all night, skillful thoughts don’t lead to any harm, but they do tire the mind, they tire the body. When the body and mind are tired, then they’re harder to control. So realize the best thing to do is to get his mind in a concentration. Again, commitment, reflection, and then acting on your reflection. When you get the mind into concentration, it’s the same sort of thing. Get it to settle down. Then you have to do what’s needed to keep it there. You have to see what works and what doesn’t work. Buddha says you’re like a cook. Just make sure that his master likes the food he eats. If you can sense that the master doesn’t like it, well, he’s going to have to change. Sometimes the master won’t say outright. You have to learn how to read the signs. In the same way, you have to learn how to read the signs. You’re sitting here with your breath. The mind is unwilling to settle down. Okay, what’s the problem? Is the problem with the mind, or is the problem with the breath? You can change the way you breathe to see if that makes any difference. You can switch to another topic, like spreading thoughts of goodwill. When you spread thoughts of goodwill, you may run into somebody that you don’t feel goodwill for. There may be an issue that came up during the day. That may be part of the problem. Or you can contemplate the unattractive nature of the body, and you may run into somebody’s body that you actually like. Which may be part of the problem. So what is there to like about it? Think of the skin being peeled away, and all the blood that would be all over the place if you did that. And we think about the body often. It’s those anatomical diagrams where all the organs are very neat, but they’re all awash with blood. And if you took the body apart, it would be pretty foul-smelling. You can imagine all the various ways to realize that it’s not really worth getting all worked up about. In other words, you check to see if there’s something buried in the mind that’s making it hard to settle down. Like the story of the princess with the pea. Lots of mattresses, but there was a little pea under the mattresses, so she couldn’t sleep. Well, for a lot of us, it’s not a pea, it’s an elephant. So we have to get the elephant out. Then the mind can settle down. And then as it settles down, you realize there are stages. In the beginning, you have to use direct thought and evaluation. In other words, you have to talk to yourself about your topic, to adjust it, so the mind and the breath fit snugly together. But then there will come a time when things have settled down, and all that talking becomes superfluous. It’s a disturbance. So what was necessary to get to settle down is no longer necessary, and it’s actually part of the problem. So you learn how to let it go. For some people, this is hard. They’re so used to talking to themselves all the time, that if there’s some silence in the mind, they feel like they’re going to disappear. Remind yourself, as long as you’re aware, you’re fine. And you go through the various levels of concentration, and what was attractive about one level then becomes a disturbance. You let it go. A similar problem comes up when everything is so still in the body, so still in the mind, that the act of breathing becomes to feel like a disturbance. Yet if you stop breathing, and here we’re not talking about forcing yourself to stop, it’s just that the body happens to stop. Some people get concerned they’re going to die. They’re going to faint. But the body will breathe if it needs to breathe. Remind yourself that when we talk about breath, it’s not so much an energy you have to take in from outside. There’s energy already in the body, and you allow it to be full. You don’t squeeze it out. When you breathe out, you learn to breathe with a sense of fullness, both in and out. That’s when the body feels full. You don’t have to breathe that much. So it’s natural. And if the mind is really still, the brain is not using up a lot of oxygen, not creating a lot of carbon dioxide in the blood. So the impulse to breathe gets weakened. You’re going to be okay. Here again, commitment, reflection. That’s how you develop skill. With that skill, that’s how you overcome the lack of skill, that’s ignorance. So at this point, you don’t have to be thinking about death. Aside from the fact that at some point you have to ask yourself, this concentration I’m doing, if I stop doing it, it’s going to run out. Is there something that I don’t have to keep on doing? Because only when you get to that are you really safe. Something that’s not affected by space, not affected by time. The Buddha says it’s there. So always open your mind to that possibility. And you’ll find that your mind inclines more and more in that direction as you get more and more familiar with your concentration. It’s what the Buddha calls training for calm. Learning how to appreciate the fact that when he says that there is no happiness other than peace, he knows what he’s talking about. And you’re willing to incline your mind in that direction. So we think about death to motivate ourselves. But then we keep thinking about death all the time. We actually get to work getting the mind to settle down. Through this process of commitment and reflection, that’s how we become skilled. That’s what all those thoughts about death, aging, illness and death, and constant stress, not-self, that’s what they’re all about. To keep reminding us that where we are is not ideal. It’s not to be accepted. It’s something to be overcome. And the path to overcoming it is open. We can take the skills that we’ve learned from the Buddha, and particularly his instructions on how to learn to teach ourselves, how to train ourselves, and give them the best we’ve got.

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