The Buddha’s Encouragement

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One of the most frequent metaphors in the Canon for the practice is that the practice is like a battle. You’re a soldier and there’s an enemy and the enemy is trying to kill you. The problem is the enemy is inside and the enemies are inside. This is true all the way from the practice of virtue to concentration, discernment. Sometimes in the practice of virtue it’s a matter of brute determination that you’re just going to see it through, not let yourself get discouraged. One of the images is about a soldier who’s here, hears that there’s an army coming, sees the cloud of dust, actually sees the army itself, is engaged in hand-to-hand combat. This image for a monk who’s tempted or not tempted to give up his precepts. He hears that there’s a beautiful woman in another village. The weak monk just gives up. It’s like a soldier who hears that there’s going to be a battle, gives up. You see the woman, the woman approaches you, hand-to-hand combat. And it’s a strong and courageous monk who doesn’t give in. Interesting because all too often those who are celibate are portrayed as weak. Unmanly. But the Buddha is giving you another frame of reference entirely. You hold on to your precepts. That’s the strong and courageous person. In cases like that it’s often just brute determination. When you get into concentration and discernment, the battle is a lot more delicate. You’ve got to do battle with your hindrances. Sensual desire comes up. You’re sitting here thinking, “Nobody knows what’s going through my mind right now. I might as well just think about some sensual pleasures.” Or you start thinking about somebody you really don’t like. If you’d like to see them suffer, that’s ill will. You’re drowsy and you’re willing to just drift into either sleep or delusion concentration, where it’s very quiet inside the mind, but it’s not very clear. You come out of it wondering, “Was I awake? Was I asleep?” And while you’re in there, you’re not really clear about what you’re focused on. Just restlessness and anxiety. You can worry about things you did in the past or worry about things that can happen in the future. Or doubt. You can decide that doubt is reasonable. Doubt about yourself and your ability to do the practice. Doubt about the practice itself. These hindrances don’t just go away through brute determination on your part. Remember, there are voices in your own mind and they speak with your voice. They sound like you. And you’ve often used their arguments yourself. But you have to view them as, what’s the term? False AI. They look like you, they sound like you, but they’re not you. The problem is they’re backed up by a set of values that you may have believed in the past and you’re trying to adopt. A new set of values. A set of values in which concentration is really a good thing. Getting the mind calm with as few thoughts as possible. Getting very quiet, not much going on inside. That’s a good thing. And part of us will say, “Yes, sounds pretty good.” But then when you get there, how many times have you found that it gets boring? Nothing’s happening. You want the insights to come really fast so you can get on with this business. So you have to learn to recognize all those other voices that are going to come in. And again, they sneak their way into sounding like you and adopt your values. So you have to change your values. Remind yourself you’re here to do an experiment. You’re here to see what is actually going on in the mind that’s creating suffering. You’re going to have to learn how to step back from the processes in the mind in order to do that. And that requires a good place to stand. This quiet spot in the mind. So this spot where nothing seems to be happening is really worth looking into, really worth protecting. Because as your sensitivity grows, you begin to see a lot is going on in that quiet state of mind. You’ve got the form of the body, you’ve got the feeling of pleasure that you’re trying to develop, the perceptions that hold you here, the intentions, the thought fabrications that keep you here, and your awareness. All the aggregates are right here. They’re all doing their thing. And of course, we want to learn about the aggregates, so this is a good place to learn about them. See them on their subtle level. There are a couple passages in the Canon where the Buddha talks about his own problems in getting the mind into concentration. We read that you have to be secluded from sensuality and unskillful mental states. We read that you have to get rid of the hindrances before you can get here. It’s good to read about how the Buddha handled those problems himself. He said, “How can you get the monks to get their minds into concentration? Because it’s really hard to get the mind to leap up at the idea of renunciation.” And then he says, “Let’s go talk to the Buddha about this.” So they go there. And then he reports what the man has said. And the Buddha says, “You know, I myself had trouble getting enthusiastic about renunciation, seclusion. But I realized it had to be done.” So I trained myself to focus on the drawbacks of sensuality and on the rewards of seclusion, the rewards of renunciation. You have to choose what you think about. Choose how you’re going to persuade yourself. Self-persuasion is a huge part of the practice, so that you can change your values. The other time the Buddha was talking to Aniruddha, who was having some trouble in his concentration. The Buddha said, “Yeah, I too had my trouble.” And he talks about the different problems he encountered as he tried to get the mind to be steady. Sometimes there’s too much energy, sometimes too little energy. Sometimes he got bored. Sometimes he just wasn’t paying attention. On top of that, of course, there are the different hindrances that came in. Sloth and torpor, doubt. In each case, he had to identify what the problem was and figure out some technique for counteracting it. So it requires some discernment to get the mind to settle down. When you are fighting with the mind’s old habits. But it’s a good fight. It’s just important that you don’t get tempted by those people who say, “All you have to do is relax your way into awakening. The more you do, the more you’re getting in the way of what’s naturally there.” What’s naturally there? The Buddha said the mind is naturally changeable. It can switch directions on you at any time. It’s capable of all kinds of things. It’s not the case that it’s only naturally a mind of goodwill, or a mind of clarity and luminosity. It’s capable of being just anything. So you’re channeling it in the right direction. And it’s good to take encouragement from the Buddha, because that’s what he’s trying to do. He talks about his problems in getting the mind concentrated. Sometimes we read about the Buddha and he seems superhuman. And it’s hard to think about how we can lift ourselves up to do anything that he says. He makes it sound so easy. Unskillful thought arises in the mind and you just destroy it, wipe it out of existence. But as he shows, he had to do a struggle too. One, to recognize that it was unskillful. Two, not to want to go with what was unskillful. And then three, to figure out some way to counteract his mind’s tendency to go there. So take encouragement from the Buddha. It is a battle inside. But it’s a battle that can be won. That’s one of his names from the Noble Eightfold Path, victory in battle. To realize this was a path found by a human being. Someone in the course of his many lifetimes who had made a lot of mistakes. Even in his last lifetime he made mistakes on his way to awakening. But he was able to learn from them. It’s a part of our practice of the recollection of the Buddha, recollecting, yes, he was a human being. But he was able to use his human strengths to overcome his human weaknesses. And he wants us to do the same.

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