Trust in the Power of the Mind

July 31, 2024

The path starts with right view. Notice that’s not right knowledge. It’s right view. Knowledge comes later, with the different noble attainments. But with right view, the Buddha’s letting you borrow some of his insight, borrow some of his knowledge, and take it on as a working hypothesis. This is going to be a good path to follow. As the Buddha said, it’s admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end. But the best is to save for last. In the beginning you’re taking a gamble. You don’t know if the Buddha’s right or wrong about things like rebirth or karma. But you do know that they’re good things to believe, in the sense that they affirm your power to shape your life in a good way. Think about that reflection we have sometimes. Subject to aging, illness, death, separation from all that is dear and appealing to me. Those are the reflections that point out to you that you live in a dangerous world. Things that you depend on, the things that you love. They’re going to be taken from you someday. So what have you got? You’ve got your actions. Your actions can make a difference. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fuller. That’s affirming your agency. That the choices you make are your choices, and that they will make a difference. That’s good to believe. Because if you believe otherwise, that your actions have no meaning, or you’re not really responsible for them, you’re left defenseless. This machine of the world can just grind you down, and you’d have no recourse. You know the Buddha is saying, based on his experience, yes, we can make a difference. And it’s a good thing to believe. There’s a discourse where he says it’s like taking a bet. You’re making a safe bet. If it turns out that your actions didn’t give good results, no matter how good you made the actions, or it turned out there was no rebirth, at the very least you’ve lived an honorable life. That’s something that can sustain you. And so you hear the Buddha calling on your sense of honor. That you’re willing to do good, even without the reward. But then again, he says, it’s not going to be without a reward. So you place some trust in him. Because are you going to place your trust in people who teach otherwise? What kind of people are they? And where would their teachings lead you if you actually followed them? I had a strange conversation one time with an editor of a Buddhist magazine, talking about how you have to believe in the power of your actions. Otherwise you’re left to drift. You don’t know what to do. He says, yes, well I guess, suppose so, if you act in line with your beliefs. And I wonder, what kind of beliefs do you have that you don’t act in line with? So you realize there are a lot of things you don’t know in life. The Buddha can’t prove karma to you. He can’t prove rebirth. But there’s a pragmatic reason for adopting these views as right views. Because you behave in a better way, and you behave in a safer way. It’s only when you get to the first noble attainment, the entry, where the mind steps outside of space and time for a bit. And in the course of stepping outside of time, you realize that time has gone on. Your experience of time has gone on for a long time, much more longer than this one lifetime. So even if you don’t see the particulars of previous lifetimes, you know that this has been going on for many, many, many, what you say, years, eons. There seems to be no end, no beginning to it. But at that point you begin to see there’s also a possible end. Because it is possible to taste the deathless. And to know that it is totally free from the stress of ordinary experience. That’s when you can begin to say that you begin to know. It’s also the point in the practice where the Buddha says you actually begin your training. By that point you’ve developed confirmed confidence in the Buddha. That what he says on these topics is right. Because on the other hand you also know that it was through your own efforts that you got that experience. Through your choices and the moment where you have no intention at all, and things open up. That was through your own discernment. So once you’ve had these things confirmed, then you’re really on the path. Prior to that point you’re on for a bit, and then you’re off, and then you’re on again, off again. You try to make it on as much as you can. But the sense of confidence in the Buddha, the sense of confidence in the path that he taught, gets a lot stronger at that point. So people haven’t had that experience yet. They’re making attempts at training, but they’re not really in training. But still, to whatever extent you can practice, it’s all to the good. The Buddha keeps making reference to animals that have been tamed and trained. How much more they can do than if they haven’t been trained. And your mind is like that. It just runs all over the place. It’s got a lot of potentials, but it doesn’t make most of those potentials. It’s the training that makes the most of this power that the mind has of making choices. And the power of what the mind can do, the power of what the mind can know. You don’t really know those things until you’ve submitted to the training. As the Buddha says, just in the case of jhana, the things that can be known through the practice of jhana, the powers that can be developed through the practice of jhana, are inconceivable. In other words, trying to figure out what a person with that level of concentration can do and can’t do. That’s inconceivable, to say nothing of the range of a Buddha. Our sense of what the mind can do, what the mind can know, has been greatly limited by our education. We’ve become sensitive to certain things that are useful for the society. And as the society gets more and more capitalist, the education gets more and more capitalist. Things like the humanities, religion, it’s fall to the wayside. The things that are actually good for your mind fall to the wayside. So you get sensitized to the things that are useful for making a living. But the areas that used to be developed through the practice of the mind, training the mind, those again are pretty studded. We have this pride in our Western education, but we have to realize that it’s very good in some areas and very limited in others. And so our sense of what the mind can do has been studded in some areas. There was a British academic a while back who was saying that when they talk about concentration in the Canon, you have to realize that back in those days they didn’t read. So they didn’t have the powers of concentration that we have now. So when they’re talking about concentration, it’s nothing amazing, nothing beyond what we already know. Which shows you how ignorant academics can be. The power of the mind is largely untapped. So here we are meditating, assuming that the mind does have some power. After all, if it were just the result of physical events, sitting here and meditating wouldn’t make much of a difference. But the fact that you can direct your intentions, direct your acts of attention in a way that can bring stillness, that can bring a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, a sense of rapture, clarity to the mind. That’s because the mind is not just on the receiving end of things. The mind is the forerunner of all experience. It’s the mind that’s in charge. Things are made by the mind. There’s good reason that they put that verse at the beginning of the Dhammapada. It’s the power of the mind that we’re training here, the power of the mind that we’re cultivating. And so it’s good not to have any preconceived notions about how limited that might be. Each of us has our own karma in terms of what we can know, how far we can develop these possibilities. But you’re not going to know the potential of the mind until you work at developing it, actualizing it. This is what the practice of right concentration does. You seclude yourself from your ordinary sensual fantasies. And unskillful thoughts. You focus it on one thing. You think about that one thing, i.e. the breath. You work with it so that it gives rise to a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, a sense of refreshment. You energize the body, you energize the mind. And then you allow them to grow calm. And then you work with the calming of the mind, the calming of the breath. Things begin to peel away. Even things right in your own mind that you never saw clearly become a lot clearer. Unfortunately, that’s the aspect of meditation that’s really important. We read about the other powers that can be developed. You can say, for the time being, well, at the moment I know nothing about those. But I do know that the Buddha says I can put an end to suffering. That’s something I want to try. So it’s all laid out. It all makes sense. But it requires that we have a sense of how limited we are in our ability to know the Dharma until we’ve done the Dharma. Now little do we know about our minds until we’ve tried to train them. There are people who give up right at the beginning. They say, well, I can’t do this. I’ll try to depend on somebody else. But as the Buddha said, you have to be your own mainstay. Nobody else can do this work for you. And if you don’t do it now, when are you going to do it? So you commit yourself. Because it’s a good thing to commit yourself to. And then you learn from what you’ve done. It’s not just a matter of doing what you’re told. The Buddha does give you some examples, some ideas of what you can do with the breath. But they’re more like riddles. So breathe in a way that makes you sensitive to rapture. Well, where are you going to sense the rapture? How are you going to breathe in a way that does that? That’s something you have to learn by trial and error. That makes you sensitive to pleasure. Same thing. Breathe in and out, gladdening the mind, concentrating the mind, releasing the mind. Each of those is a riddle. So you’re not just forcing your mind into a mold, being obedient. You’re learning how to develop your own powers of commitment and reflection. And the Buddha talks about that. Question that lies at the beginning of discernment. What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? There are some places where he gives the answer that you get from other people. Practice generosity, virtue. Develop qualities of goodwill on the mind. He teaches the precepts for the virtue. He’s teaching you. But then there are a lot of areas that are not covered by the precepts and not covered by those three answers. That’s where he’s saying, this is how you answer those questions yourself. You start by asking them of other people, people you trust. But then you have to learn how to give the answers yourself. He teaches you how to reflect as you commit yourself to the practice. So it requires your own act of participation, your own act of training of yourself. And that’s inspiring. The Buddha puts a lot of trust in you, that this is something you can do, that you can master your unskillful thoughts, you can develop the good qualities he’s talking about, and you can do it on your own initiative. So it’s good that he’s placed his trust in us. It feels good to have that trust placed in us. Now it’s up to us to live up to that trust.

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