Motivation

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As John Lee points out, training the mind is like raising a child. When the child cries, you have to read the cry. Is it hungry? Do you have to change the diapers? Does it want to be picked up and carried around? Does it want to be put in its playpen? Or is it just being ornery? If you can read the cry, then you know how to fix the problem. And the mind is like that. It needs to desire to practice in order to practice. And sometimes the desire is lacking. You have to figure out how to generate desire, as the Buddha says. And different days will require different methods, different approaches. It’s not the case that you can use Sanghvega every day, every day. It gets tired of that. It loses its impact. So you have to realize there are other techniques, other approaches you can use. If you just read about descriptions of hell every day, every day, they get boring after a while. So you have to realize, do you have other reasons to want to practice? One is compassion for yourself, for other people. If you can train yourself to have fewer desires, fewer defilements, life is easier and you’re less of a burden on other people. So for their sake you want to practice. You can practice out of a sense of gratitude. There are people who are supporting your practice. Everything we have here at the monastery is a gift. It came from somebody’s generosity. In some cases the generosity came hard. We don’t know for sure. When you’re a monk and you’re going on your alms round, you begin to see more easily who’s sacrificing more than other people. When I was in Thailand, there was one couple in particular. They’re very poor, newly married. They lived in a tiny shack that was just big enough for the two of them to lie down on. Had a little kitchen out back. That was it. Very frequently they would have food for me. That’s one of the days when they put food in my bowl. I would come back and I’d remind myself, okay, today you were the beneficiary of a poor person’s generosity. You’ve got to repay the debt. So it’s a combination of gratitude and also a sense of indebtedness. As the Buddha said, the only people who eat alms food without any debt are our aunts. And John Foon would talk about how monks who don’t practice are destined to be reborn as water buffaloes the next time around, to repay all the rice that they’ve eaten. So whether you’re a monk or a layperson here at the monastery, you realize you’re here feeding off of other people’s generosity. There’s a debt. So sometimes a sense of indebtedness gets you to practice. Sometimes a more warm-hearted sense of generosity, gratitude, will be what satisfies you and motivates you. Sometimes there’s simply a sense of heedfulness. You know that even without the Buddhist cosmos to back you up, there will come a day when you get old and sick. If you’re lucky enough to get old, or you get sick, you want to make sure that you have your wits about you. If you really want to get a strong sense of this lifetime Sangha, go to an old folks home and see the people who haven’t trained their minds at all, how they suffer from pain, from delusion, dementia. And remind yourself there are ways to prepare. If dementia comes, at the very least you train your mind to have good habits. The more sense of well-being, a sense of goodwill you can develop as you go through the day. The more likely that your dementia will be a comfortable dementia. There are people whose dementia is filled with terror, filled with anger. There are others who are pretty content. So think about that. You can train your mind in the direction of the Brahma-viharas. Even if you’re not planning to go to the Brahma worlds after death, you at least want to have a sense of contentment. As life gets shorter, and shorter, and your abilities get less and less. So prepare for that. What it comes down to, as I said, is learning how to read your mind, to see what will motivate it now. And have lots and lots of approaches. Because when we’re out and you get tired of thinking about compassion for a while, you can think about the danger of aging, illness, and death. Aging, illness, and death isn’t enough. You can think about the Buddhist cosmos. Some people say that the teaching on rebirth was meant to be comforting for weak-willed people, weak-minded people. It’s not comforting at all. You can do a lot of good in this lifetime, and then have a change of heart at the moment of death. That would delay the good results of your actions. You could suffer a lot in the meantime. And you don’t know how much karma you’ve got from the past. Maybe you’re here on a brief reprieve, like the story of that young novice. John had a vision one night when the Hell Guardian came and said, “Okay, the novice is going to have to go tomorrow.” And then John said, “Well, he’s been a good novice. Can’t you spare him?” And the Hell Guardian said, “No, he’s got some really bad karma.” So there are cases like that. And sure enough, the novice died the next day. John had told him to meditate a lot, but the novice still died. So there are cases like that in the world. And if the descriptions of hell seem too fanciful, just look at the hells that we have on the human realm. Think of all the war zones and places of famine where little kids still want to get born. It’s a bad idea, but their karma impels them. And you may have some karma that would impel you in a place like that. Then you want to prepare the mind for whatever eventuality there is. As the Buddha said, one of the measures of your discernment is to deal with cases where you know something is going to have good long-term results but you just don’t feel like doing it. You’re learning how to make yourself want to do it. So learning how to psych yourself out is an important part of discernment. And the more tricks you have, the more approaches you have, the more of your mind’s tricks you’ll be able to overcome. So discernment isn’t just a matter of thinking about inconstancy, stress, not-self, or the Four Noble Truths, or dependent co-arising, or emptiness. It comes down to the nitty-gritty of “I don’t feel like doing this, but I know it’s going to be good for me. How do I make myself want to do it?” Of course, if you don’t want to want to do it, you don’t get anywhere. So as long as you can maintain that desire, that determination, even in the days when your more passing desires, your more vagrant desires, are not in line with the practice, you have an underlying determination that says, “I still want to see this through.” And it’s through that determination that you gain discernment. Think of that image that Ajaan Chah has. You’re walking back from the market and you’ve got a banana. You’ve got a banana in your hand. And somebody asks you, “What are you going to do with the banana?” You say, “I’m going to eat it.” “Are you going to eat the peel too?” “No.” “Then why are you holding the peel?” And then Ajaan Chah asks, “With what will you answer that?” Notice it’s not, “What is the answer?” It’s, “With what will you answer that?” You answer it with a desire. You want to be able to give a good answer to that person. Well, that’s how you come up with the right answer. The time hasn’t come to let go of the peel. If I let go of it now, it’s mush in my hands. But that desire is what gets you to think of the answer to begin with. So keep that underlying desire going, even on days when it seems rough. There must be a way to get around whatever the problem is in the mind. And if you can’t find it yet, well, keep trying. As the Jamaa voice says, “If you’re in the ring with somebody, you’ve got to fight them.” And even though you lose, you learn something about their tricks. So the next time you may not be fooled by their tricks. It’s by being willing to lose rather than not putting up a fight at all. That’s how you learn.

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