Taking Responsibility

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The Buddha’s description of his own search for awakening is one of the oldest spiritual autobiographies in the world. Some people have found that ironic, that the Buddha, in writing about himself, or talking about himself, was not speaking in the language his teachings are not so self. But then again, the Buddha never called himself a natta-vadin, a teacher of not-self. He called himself a gamma-vadin, someone who taught action. And as we read his quest for awakening, we realize it’s a lesson in how to act, a lesson in the power of human action, and how to use that power. In his own case, he had to go down a lot of blind alleys, but he found the right path. But the way in which he found the right path is instructive. He would commit himself to a path of practice, and then reflect on it. Was he getting the results he wanted? Sometimes the commitment was extreme. Six years of self-torture, forcing himself not to breathe, forcing himself to go on very little food, to the point where he realized that if he pursued that path of practice any further, he’d die without gaining any attainment. So in every case, when he found that he was not satisfied with the path that he’d been following, it was based on the fact that he actually had committed himself fully to it. So there’s no question of his passing an unfair judgment. But then he wouldn’t give up. He’d ask himself, “If this is not the right path, what would be the right path?” He became more and more open to possibilities that were not taught in his day. The fact that you could get the mind into the First Jhana Sangha, and that could be part of the path to awakening, that wasn’t taught anywhere else. So it’s showing what we can do. We have this possibility of acting in such a way that does lead to awakening. And we can look at our actions and reflect on them. And it’s our choice of doing these things that sort of makes all the difference. When the Buddha introduced his own son to the practice, there was a series of instructions on how to be responsible. First, he emphasized the importance of being truthful. As he said, if you can tell a deliberate lie with no sense of shame, you don’t have the quality of a contemplative. Because you’re going to have to be truthful, both to yourself and to other people. If you’re going to learn from anyone else, you have to be truthful about what you’re doing and the results you’re getting. If you’re going to learn from your own actions, you have to be truthful about what you’re doing and the results you’re getting. Then he had Rahula go through his actions from the very beginning, i.e. from the intention, the desire to act. He was supposed to take responsibility from that point onward. So he wasn’t telling Rahula that the path will just develop naturally on its own, or there’s nobody there to do the path. Some people take the teaching on itself to mean that there’s nobody to practice, which is very irresponsible. Buddha himself would attack that attitude. He said, if you’re taught that everything you experience is based on somebody’s past actions, you’re left defenseless, unprotected, bewildered. In other words, things can come up in your mind, and you don’t have any reason to say no to them. An important part of the path is just that, seeing things come up in your mind, realizing if I act on these things, it’s going to be unskillful. I have to say no. That was the Buddha’s first instruction to Rahula. That’s how you take responsibility. You anticipate the results of your actions. You make your decision as to what to do and what not to do, based on that anticipation. If you anticipate no harm, then you can go ahead and do the action. But even then, you have to check. Here again, you’re being responsible for this action that I am doing. Notice, he taught Rahula to use the concept of “I”. Both in thinking about the action that I want to do, and now the action that I am doing. Is it causing any harm to myself? To others? To both? If it is causing harm, Rahula was to stop. If it wasn’t causing any harm, at least as far as he could see, then he could continue. When he was done, he was still responsible. This action that I did, what were the actual consequences? And if he saw that, even though he didn’t anticipate any harm, or didn’t see any harm while he was doing the action, if there actually was harm, that came about, then he was to resolve not to repeat the action, and go talk it over with someone who was more advanced on the path, to get some ideas about how not to repeat that mistake. If he could see that there was no harm done, then he should take joy in the fact that his training was getting results. So all throughout, the Buddha was teaching responsibility. You’re talking about karma. Whose karma are you talking about? You’re talking about your own. And so you want to be responsible for it. If your karma was not your choice, then you couldn’t say that karma was a force anywhere at all. It would be somebody else’s force, or something else’s force, acting through you. But here you are making decisions. This is why the Buddha would speak about his quest for awakening, to show that this is what a human being can do. This is what action can do, if you take responsibility for your actions. So you’re responsible both in the commitment, in really giving yourself to the practice, and in your reflection, as you reflect on the results. And you hold yourself responsible for the results. Now you will learn that there are things that are coming in from the past, over which you have no control. But you’re not going to know what those things are, over which you have no control, unless you try to exert some control yourself. It’s only when you push against them, that you’re going to find out exactly where they push back. The Thai and Chinese like to use this as an image. You’re growing rice. And you want the rice to grow fast. The proper way is to fertilize it, make sure it gets enough water, make sure that no insects or mice eat it. But the rice plant is going to have to grow on its own. If you try to help it by pulling it up, you uproot it, and the plant dies. But you’re not going to know exactly what is your responsibility, and what is the rice plant’s responsibility, until you try. You learn from other people, the people who tell you not to pull it up. And then you observe. How much fertilizer is too much, how much fertilizer is too little. How much water is too much, how much water is too little. The practice is not just pushing and pushing and pushing. It’s showing when things push back, how you respond. But again, you’re not going to learn that without the commitment and the reflection that amount to being responsible. As you’re working with the breath right now, there are certain things in the body that will not respond to comfortable breathing. But you’re not going to know where they are until you try to allow the comfortable breath to go throughout the body. First figure out what kind of breathing does feel good right now, and then how you let it spread. And you learn from trial and error, and then trial and success. So you take responsibility for your training. And that’s what being in training means. It’s interesting to note that when the Buddha talks about those who are in training, it starts with stream-entering. Because that’s the point, as he says, where you become independent in the Dhamma. Prior to that point, you have to depend on other people to give you advice, point out where you’re wrong. With stream-entering, you reach the point where you can begin to monitor yourself reliably. That doesn’t mean you can’t use advice from other people. The path goes a lot more quickly when you do take advice. But you have to get the right advice, and you’ll know. And John Mahonbo talks about being in a stage in his practice when Ajahn Mun passed away. And no matter who he would listen to, he was not quite right for his problems. He knew exactly what his problems were, and so he was the one who had to solve them. That’s what it means to be training yourself. That comes from repeated commitment and repeated reflection. And we have this ability to reflect. If we couldn’t reflect on our actions, then you could say we’re not responsible. It’s like having a machine. Turn on the switch and the machine goes. The machine doesn’t know whether it’s harming anybody or not if somebody gets caught in its gears. It can’t be held responsible. But we’re not machines. We’re sensitive beings. We’re proactive beings. So we take our proactive side and we use it to commit to the practice. And our sensitive side to reflect. We develop both of those. So the commitment is strong and the reflection is all around. Circumspect. Because only when it’s circumspect that you’ll see things that you didn’t see before. Everything you need to know is happening right now in your mind and your body. It’s just that you’re not paying attention. You’re not paying careful attention enough and your attention is not all around. But those qualities can be developed if you take responsibility for them. So it’s a path that is all about being responsible. That’s what the story of the Buddha’s quest for awakening was. It’s a path of being responsible. It’s simply a matter of our learning how to follow his example. you

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