A Promise to Yourself

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The practice is a promise that you make to yourself. When you take on the precepts, nobody forces you. The Buddha himself doesn’t force you. But you might say that your suffering forces you. You realize that you’re suffering, you’ve got to do something about it. If you just sit back and accept it, nothing’s going to happen. You’re certainly not on the path. Because the Buddha teaches a path where you do something about the problem of suffering. You look at what you’re doing, ask yourself, “What am I doing that’s wrong?” You start with the precepts. There’s a passage in the beginning of the Karna Niyameta Sutta, “This is what should be done by those who appreciate the state of peace.” I was at a class one time, being taught by someone else, on that sutta, taking it apart line by line. I got to the first line. My hands shot up. I thought there were no shuddhs in Buddhism. The poor teacher had to spend the whole morning explaining how there could be a shuddh in the Dhamma. It’s really quite easy. If you want to put an end to suffering, if you appreciate the state of peace, this is what you’ve got to do. But again, nobody’s enforcing it, unless you enforce yourself. That’s why the precepts require mindfulness, alertness, and urgency. You’re mindful to keep the precept in mind. You’re alert to see what you’re actually doing. And if you see that your behavior is slipping away from the precept, you have to be ardent in getting it back. Ardency here basically is another word for right effort. An important part of right effort is generating desire, motivating yourself. This then applies to the practice of concentration. You don’t just sit here letting the mind decide whether it’s going to settle down on its own or not. You have to induce it. You have to direct it. Make up your mind you’re going to stay here and then watch over it. Putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world, anything that comes in to pull you away from the breath right now, you’ve got to say no, no, no. Sometimes you have to give yourself reasons. And as you can imagine, discernment is also a promise you make to yourself. You could sit there and just sort of bliss out in the concentration and decide, well, this is good enough for me. But then you have to remember what the Buddha said about fabricated happiness. The fact that you’re sitting here with the mind quiet, nothing’s happening, it’s not going to last. Either something outside will come to disturb it, or you get tired of being quiet and still. So you want to remember that there’s more work to be done. Even in a quiet mind, there’s still little bits and blips of disturbance coming from within. The way the mind maintains that state of stillness contains all kinds of aggregates and mental events, acts of attention, acts of intention. There are many levels of conversation going on inside. You get one level still, and then in the stillness you begin to realize there’s another conversation going on. It’s all subtle. You’ve got to look into that. That’s the proper attitude. So you’ve got to learn how to motivate yourself to stick with your promise you’ve made. The Buddha offers three ways of thinking about this. He calls it atipatthaya, which means governing principle. What you want to have in charge of your mind. The first one is yourself as a governing principle. You tell yourself, I came to this path, I got on to this path, because I wanted to put an end to suffering. If I were to fall away, what does that say about what I think about myself? Am I really concerned about myself? Do I really have compassion for myself? Do I really love myself? And sometimes that’s enough to get you back on the path. Because you realize that it is for your own good. And if you don’t look after your own good, who’s going to look after it for you? The world wants you to look after them. But here’s something inside that they can’t do for you. There are things that other people can do for you to help you, but doing the actual work inside, sticking with the precepts, getting the mind to settle down, and then looking deeper into that settled down mind, that’s work that only you can do. And it’s work that’s got to be done. You think about those reflections that we have, that we chant so often, aging, illness and death, separation from all that I love, and I’ve got my karma. Ajahn Suh used to make a lot of that statement. He said there are so many things the Buddha says are not self, not self, but then we get to karma and he says, well, it’s yours. So that’s what you’ve got. That’s what you take with you. That’s what greets you when you go to the other side. So where do you want to take? And I greet you. You have the choice. Again, nobody else can do this for you. Again, Ajahn Suh went, he said each of us has one person. In other words, we have ourselves that we’re really responsible for. You might say, well, I’m responsible for other members of my family, other responsibilities I have in society. But again, there are really big issues inside. You can do only so much for other people, other people can do only so much for you. The real work has to be your work. And if you can’t be true to this one person that you’re responsible for, who are you going to be true to? That’s the self as the governing principle. And there’s the world as the governing principle. This is not the world you ordinarily think about. It’s the world of commerce, the world of the media. It’s the world of people who meditate. And some of those meditators have psychic powers, and some of them can read your mind. And if they see you falling away from the path, what are they going to think? Unfortunately, these people are people of compassion, they’re not just going to judge you as bad. But they really are concerned about you. Here you are. You’ve started on the path and now you’re falling away. What are you doing to yourself? Think about what their perspective would be. Especially those who have already gained Awakening. They’ve seen how good Awakening is. This is where Mahabhagavat said, if you could take Awakening out and show it to other people, nobody would want anything else. Nothing else would be able to sell in any market anywhere. People would just be going for Awakening. They’ve seen that. And they look at you as you’re making your effort to go there. They want to encourage you. They would be behind you if they could. But if you fall away, what are they going to think? This should give you a sense of healthy shame. And stir up also your sense of honor. Here you are, human being. You have these abilities. Why are you not making use of them? They talk about people who have virtues that are pleasing to the noble ones. Well, the whole path is pleasing to the noble ones. You think about their standards and how it would be good to live up to their standards. We live in this world where so often we’re motivated by what other people think of us. Well, think about them. You don’t necessarily think about what your boss thinks about you, or what your neighbors think about you. Think about what the noble ones think about you. Because they’re the ones who have your true well-being in mind, at heart. That’s the world as a governing principle. This is the Dhamma as a governing principle. Think about how fortunate you are that you live in a place where the Dhamma is available. The people in the Buddhist time who would first hear the Dhamma would all exclaim how magnificent it was. The things that used to be murky are now clear. Things that were in the dark are now brought to light. They’re now turned, in other words, all upside down. And have been turned upright. Now, this Dhamma is true at all times, but it’s not available at all times. It’s not being taught at all times. So when you’ve found the Dhamma, take advantage of the opportunity that you have. Because you don’t know how much longer that opportunity is going to last. So these are ways of motivating yourself. Of keeping your promise to yourself. The world is so much with us. That’s a line from Wordsworth. And he was talking about the world of commerce. It’s just too oppressive. It fills up too much of our minds. So take advantage of that opportunity. So whether you think in terms of yourself, think in terms of the world, think in terms of the Dhamma. Making a good promise to yourself and then keeping it. Making it a point of honor. Realize this is a genuine expression of compassion. And in light of a John Swartz statement that the only person we really have in this world is ourselves. Do you want to look after yourself wisely? There was a teacher in Thailand who foiled the Buddhist teaching. He said, “Don’t be selfish.” Which in Thai is basically “yé hín kát dua.” Which means, “Don’t look after yourself. Don’t be concerned about yourself.” And a John Swartz would argue with that. He said, “If you’re really concerned with yourself in the right way, then other people will benefit because you’re not going to harm them if you’re really are wise in how you look after yourself.” So look after yourself wisely. The people around you will benefit. They may not benefit as much as you do, but then who else can look after you? You’re not totally on your own. The Dhamma is there to support you. The wise people of the world are there to encourage you. But if you don’t do the work, nobody can do it for you. So keep at it. Learn how to keep motivating yourself. So when you hit dry periods, when things are really hard, other periods when nothing much is happening, everything seems pretty peaceful, whatever the situation, realize there’s work to be done. There’s work that you can do. And it’s all good work.

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