When You Care

September 22, 2024

We come to meditate because we realize the mind has power. It’s the agent that shapes our lives. It’s not just on the receiving end of outside influences. It has influences coming from within. We want to make sure those are good. There are a lot of qualities that we bring to this. We bring the discernment that realizes that our actions do have long-term consequences. And we have the heedfulness to realize that some of those consequences can be pretty dangerous. We also have a quality called “compunction.” The Pali term is “otapa.” It’s translated as “fear of doing evil.” And basically what it means is you care about the consequences you’re having. Your actions, which is why you wouldn’t want to do anything unskillful, and why you would want to develop skillful qualities in the mind. Years back, a psychotherapist asked me, “Why is it when the Buddha talks about the basis for unskillful action, he talks only about greed, aversion, and delusion?” He doesn’t mention fear. And the reason is because not all fear is bad. There are lots of fears that we have that do lead us to do unskillful things. But it’s because they’re tied up with greed or aversion or delusion. There’s also the fear that comes with the discernment, and that’s what otapa is, what compunction is. It’s a fear that comes with a sense of your power. You do have the power to shape your life. You’re afraid that you could abuse it, either because you don’t know how to use it well, or because you don’t care. There’s all too much of that in the world. People realize that their actions can lead to harm, so they have that measure of discernment. But they don’t care. They’re just going to do what they want anyhow. It shows a real lack of compassion, a real lack of goodwill for themselves and for other people. So compunctionism is a type of fear that’s motivated by goodwill. You start with goodwill for yourself. You don’t want to do anything that would cause you to suffer down the line. You think about all the good things you have in life right now, and they’re all there because you cared enough in the past to act in skillful ways, even when it was difficult. Now that you’ve got those good things, do you want to throw them away? Well, no. It’s a compassion for your past self that made all that effort to do what was skillful. Compassion for your present self, and compassion for your future self, that you don’t want to cause any harm. You don’t have to put up with the suffering that comes from acting on unskillful thoughts. Like right now, as you’re meditating, nobody’s policing your thoughts. You could be thinking, thinking about anything at all. But you yourself realize, OK, if I allow myself to waste this time, when am I going to finally get serious about the meditation? You’ve got this opportunity to do good, so don’t waste it. Each time the mind wanders off, remind yourself, what’s going to be accomplished by wandering off? And you realize, there’s nothing much. And if I allow my thoughts to wander away, what’s happening to my mindfulness? What’s happening to my alertness? How am I going to develop them? It’s by being ardent in the past. In other words, trying to really do your best. That’s how these things develop. It’s interesting that the word for “ardency” in Pali is very close to the word for “compunction.” “Ardency” is “atapa.” “Compunction” is “otapa.” And there are many passages in the Canon that put them together. This combination of fear of what happens if you do unskillful things, and the desire to do things skillfully. They go together, as with any skill. You’re motivated sometimes by the sense of the dangers that come when you don’t master the skill. And sometimes by the realization of the good things that come when you do master the skill. So allow yourself to be motivated from both sides. There are people who say, “I don’t want to be motivated by fear. I want to be motivated by nothing but compassion, love, all the good, positive emotions.” But love and compassion can get very heedless if they don’t keep in mind the fact, well, there really are dangers. And you have to be careful to avoid them. If your compassion is really mature, in other words, if it really cares, then you’ve got to develop this quality of compunction. So you read up on the Dhamma to learn what kind of actions lead to bad results. And then you try to avoid those actions. He says that killing leads to a shortened life. Being cruel and beating up other beings, causing them pain, leads to a lot of illness. Showing disrespect for others leads to your being subject to disrespect. And not taking the opportunity to ask those who know, “What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” That leads to lack of discernment. So those are some of the things you want to avoid. Lying leads to hearing things that are not true. You think of all the news, fake news of various kinds that are out on the internet. We’re subjected to these things because of our own lack of truth in the past. You look at the news now and it’s hard to believe anybody. We live in a world where people are not true because of our own lack of truth. So we have to keep turning around, looking at ourselves and saying, “I’ve got to be careful about what I do. I really have to care about the consequences of my actions.” There are some people who say, “Well, I’ve done lots of good. Let me do a little bit of the unskillful things I want to do.” But that’s like saying, “I’d like a cake.” And it’s okay if there are lots of spiders and dirt in the icing. When you want something good, you want it to be thoroughly good. So you want to be thoroughly good in your actions, thoroughly good in your thoughts, your words and your deeds. And it’s important that you care. When people get into a depression, they think they have… it’s because they feel they’re powerless. And they just end up caring. But the Buddha is telling you, you have power and you can take advantage of it. And so the wise thing to do is to care about this. The compassionate thing to do is to care about the results of your actions. That’s where your discernment and your hatefulness and your compassion all come together around a compunction. So it’s a concept that we don’t hear much about. But it contains a lot of good qualities. You care enough to try to learn what are the results of different kinds of actions so you can know what’s skillful and what’s not. You care enough to learn to be mindful. In other words, to keep that knowledge in mind. And you care enough to act only in skillful ways. Remember, what the Buddha taught is the heart of the Buddhist teachings. Not doing any evil at all. Trying to bring your goodness to completion. Cleansing the mind so that it’s pure. All these activities require compunction. To make sure that you really are thoroughly in line with what the Buddha taught. Otherwise our path, as Ajahn Lee said, is sometimes on the path and sometimes on some other path. And because we go back and forth between the paths like this, we don’t get much progress. If you stick with one path, the true path, the noble path, and keep on walking, then you’re sure to make progress. When you look back on the path that you followed, then you’ll be glad you did. So compunction is basically saying a message to the future, “I care about you.” And when you think back on the good things that you are experiencing right now, take it as a message coming from the past, that at some place in the past you cared enough to do your best. That way you can be at peace with yourself and have a sense of self-esteem that really does have a firm foundation in reality.

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