Up for the Challenge

January 15, 2025

Years back I was giving a talk at a meditation center back east, and I happened to mention that when you meditate, as you practice, there has to be the desire to practice, the desire to develop skillful qualities and to abandon unskillful ones. It’s part of right effort. One of the people in the audience raised his hand and said, “Wait a minute, wherever there’s desire there’s going to be suffering, right?” “Yeah.” He thought he caught me in a contradiction. But you look at your practice, and I told him, “Has your practice been constantly smooth and pleasant all the way?” “Well, no.” There’s going to be struggle in the practice, because you have lots of different desires inside. It’s not the case that when you sit down to practice, everybody inside is on board. You have lots of different desires going in different directions. An important part of learning how to meditate, the kind of practice that you can live with, is to learn how to negotiate. You can see at least three types of voices inside. The voices that tell you what you should be doing, and there are lots of different “shoulds” inside. Then the voices say, “Well, this is what I want to do.” There are lots of those as well. And your job as a meditator is to learn how to negotiate. Fortunately, the Buddha’s “shoulds” are all in your favor. But that doesn’t mean all the ideas of what you should be doing inside come from the Buddha. You have lots of ideas about your duties that have nothing to do with the practice at all. So you have to sort out which of those duties are you really going to follow. Which ones are you going to give priority to, and which ones you have to say no to. Exactly how much you’re going to let the Buddha’s “shoulds” take over your life. His “shoulds” are pretty simple. You should try to comprehend suffering, which means seeing that suffering is in the clinging to form, feeling, perceptions, thought fabrications, consciousness. You want to see yourself suffering in the act of clinging itself. Sometimes we’re told that we suffer because we cling to impermanent things. But it’s possible to cling even to permanent things and suffer. You have to learn how to let go of everything at some point. And that’s what the duty is with regard to the cause of suffering, wherever there’s craving that leads you to cling. That’s to be abandoned. The end of suffering is to be realized. The path to the practice, to the end of suffering, is to be developed. So those are the Buddha’s “shoulds.” And the question is to what extent are you going to let those “shoulds” have a voice, and let them actually have some power over what you’re doing, some authority. This is where the Buddha said, “A measure of your wisdom lies in seeing that there are some things that you would like to do but you know are going to give rise to long-term suffering.” And how you can talk yourself into not wanting to do them, or things that you don’t like to do that will give rise to long-term happiness. How can you talk yourself into wanting to do them? We tend to think of our wants as kind of raw, unmediated, but a lot of our desires come from the way we talk to ourselves, and the voices we pick up from outside, the “shoulds” we pick up from outside. So you have to learn how to negotiate. One of the basic principles of a negotiation is that everybody gets a piece. If somebody’s at the table, you don’t want them to go away empty-handed, otherwise they’re going to rebel. One of the voices that’s most obstreperous is the one that says, “I want happiness right now. I don’t have to think about the long term. Give me some instant gratification.” This is one of the reasons why we contemplate, why we practice concentration, to get a sense of well-being inside. But that also requires that we come to the concentration with a sense of well-being, which is why the practice is not just sitting with your eyes closed. It involves generosity, it involves virtue. And again, you have to learn how to talk to yourself, to get a sense of well-being, a sense of pride that comes out of generosity, a sense of pride that comes out of practicing the precepts. Pride not so much in comparing yourself with other people, but just an inner sense of self-worth. That you learn how to say “no” to your unskillful desires, but do it in such a way that you’re not just miserable. You’re offering them something better, a better kind of happiness, and it’s immediate. As the Buddha points out, when you practice generosity and practice virtue, the happiness doesn’t come later. It’s there in the action itself. And a lot of it has to do with learning how to appreciate it. Appreciate your generosity, appreciate your virtue. And we come to the concentration with a sense of competence and confidence that you can do this. And again, there’s struggle. All those hindrances are just waiting for you to have a lapse in mindfulness. So you have to counteract them. Instead of thinking about sensuality, you think about the breath. Instead of allowing yourself to get into periods of doubt, you actually experiment. How about trying it this way? How about trying it that way? It’s the evaluation. You try to evaluate the breath in a way that gives rise to a sense of energy. Rapture. That counteracts sleepiness. And a sense of well-being. That helps to counteract any ill will you might be suffering from. And then you just learn how to stay focused right here. It helps to counteract the mind’s tendency to worry about this, worry about that, be restless, fidgeting around. These are the qualities of concentration. These are the factors that go into getting your mind to settle down. Singleness of preoccupation, direct thought and evaluation. Rapture, pleasure. These are your weapons against the hindrances. And they also speak to that part of the mind that wants some pleasure right now. So learn how to cultivate them. These are part of your negotiating skills. And then you learn how to give yourself encouragement. Because a lot of voices in the mind are still not satisfied with the concentration. They want some entertainment. They want some variety. In which case you can start thinking about where do my defilements tend to go? What other topics of meditation can I bring in? Last, we’ll think about the body. Think about not only the body, your body, the other person’s body, but also the fantasies you have around this. As the Buddha points out, our cravings may not be located where we think they are. We think we crave a body. For me, we crave an image. It has nothing to do with the body at all. This is one of the reasons why we contemplate the 32 parts of the body to say, well, this is what you’re actually getting. Does it correspond to the image that you’re holding in mind? Or your fantasies may have very little to do with the actual bodies, but more the role you play. And you ask yourself, well, how realistic is that? Think of a John Lee when he was thinking of disrobing. He decided to prepare himself mentally. So he started thinking about what kind of life he would like to have as a layperson. And at first everything was going really well, and possibly well, in fact. But then reality began to get in. He wanted a daughter of a nobleman as his wife, which was pretty impossible. But then he realized if he had a daughter of a nobleman, she’d have to work too, and she was not used to working. Health might be fragile. She ends up giving birth to a baby and dies. And the reality comes in more and more and more. That’s how he was able to get past that fantasy. So look at your fantasies about what you want. How realistic are they? How complete are they? How all-around are they? This is just an example of how you would deal, say, with a problem of lust. But you also contemplate your anger. You can contemplate anything that’s unskillful coming up in the mind. Ask yourself, is this voice that wants me to get involved in this unskillful emotion, how far can I trust it? This way, in your negotiation, you help to weaken the unskillful members as you’re trying to strengthen the skillful ones. Because a successful negotiation doesn’t just give in to everybody. You should have some sense of priorities, what you really want in your life. But your priorities may not correspond with the Buddhist priorities. Be clear about that when that’s the case. Accept the fact that, OK, this is what I really want. There’s going to be these problems down the line. There are going to be these problems down the line. But be clear-eyed about it. If you’re more inclined to say, well, I want to devote my time totally to the practice, be clear-eyed about the fact that you’ve got to do a lot of negotiating because there’s going to be struggle inside. You see those descriptions in the Canon of a monk embarking on the practice, and everything flows smoothly from one level of the practice to the next, without any struggle. Then you look in the Theragatha, you know the passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about it, or some people talk about themselves, they have a lot of struggle. Getting the mind into concentration and seeing it crash, getting it again, seeing it crash again, getting suicidal over the fact. The Buddha says there are some people who practice the holy life with tears running down their faces. But he says it’s better to hold on. In the long run you’ll be glad that you did. So don’t expect the practice to be smooth. But learn how to talk to yourself in a way that gives rise to some fighting spirit, that whatever the challenges are, I want to be up for them. I’m not going to let myself be fooled by the defilements ever again. Think of Ajahn Mun’s very last Dhamma talk, where he compares the practice to going into battle, the different aspects of the practice. Discernment of the weapons, concentration is the food. Then there’s the soldier. The soldier is the determination not to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements ever again. You want to learn how to hold to what you think is really important, have a clear sense of priorities, and be willing to fight everything that comes up. So in some cases there’s negotiation, and sometimes there’s just out-and-out battle. Ajahn Mahaprabhu talks about going into battle, finishing off the defilements. And Ajahn Lee talks about learning how to convert some of the defilements to your side. But even then he says you have to be very alert, very heedful. But either way, it’s going to be a struggle. And learn how to enjoy the struggle. Enjoy the challenge. Because you have been the laughingstock of defilements for a long, long time. And now here’s your chance to put an end to that situation. So even though there’s a battle, see it as something you enjoy. You’ve got the opportunity to fight for freedom. Learn how to appreciate that opportunity. Do your best.

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