Taking the Practice Home

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Why at the monastery? The monastery provides a good environment for the practice. You’ve got the quiet of seclusion. Other people around you are practicing. It gives you a leg up. The problem is when you leave the monastery. How do you provide yourself with a good environment for the practice? Part of the issue is the question of finding some seclusion, even at home. But more importantly, there’s the mental environment that you have to learn how to provide for yourself. You can listen to Dhamma talks. But a lot of the work is your own. You think about how the Buddha talks about what is it that provides a good foundation for mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. You think about the five faculties or the five strengths. Those three faculties have to depend on the faculty of conviction and the faculty of persistence. So those are the qualities you have to nurture. And as the Buddha said, you nurture those through heedfulness. He recommends that you reflect every day that you haven’t gone beyond aging, you haven’t gone beyond illness, you haven’t gone beyond death. You’re going to be subject to separation from everything that you find dear and appealing. Those are things we don’t usually think about when we’re outside of the monastery. The culture around us tries to focus our attention someplace else. And so you have to learn how to live with the fact that you are a stranger in your own culture. You’ve been, in some ways, a stranger to your old self, the old self before you practiced. And that old self is still hanging around. It would be perfectly happy to use the outside environment as an excuse to not be so stringent in the practice, not be so devoted to the practice. So you have to watch out for those voices inside that say, “Why think about aging, illness, and death? There’s so much life around.” It’s tied up in aging, illness, and death. And if we died and that was it, it wouldn’t be much you would have to do about our preparation. But death is not the end. There’s rebirth, and re-death, and re-aging, and re-illness. And you’re going to need to muster all of your strength of your mind, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment to handle these things skillfully so you don’t have to suffer from them, and you don’t have to suffer from the consequences of acting in unskillful ways. Because that’s what the fifth reflection is for, that in the face of aging, illness, and death and separation, we have to act skillfully if we don’t want to suffer. That’s the way out. The first four reflections are kind of depressing. If you stopped right there, it would be very depressing. But the Buddha wasn’t teaching that. He wasn’t teaching depression. He was simply focusing on the fact that these things do exist. We do suffer from aging. We do suffer from illness, and death, and separation. Most of us are bewildered. As he says, there are two reactions to suffering. One is bewilderment. Why is this happening? The second is a search. This is somebody who knows a way or two to put an end to the suffering. So we look for something to end our bewilderment. The problem is our search is often guided by bewilderment. But we finally find an answer to the question, “Why is there suffering?” And it’s an answer that gives us some role in putting an end to it. That’s when we give rise to conviction. There are so many teachings out there that don’t give you any role. They say, “Well, it depends on some force outside of you, whether you’re going to suffer or not.” Happiness is kind of like a lottery game. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose, but there’s no real pattern. That kind of teaching leaves you bewildered still. But when you find a good teaching that says, “It’s within your power to put an end to suffering,” and it’s being taught by people of integrity, that’s when you give rise to a sense of conviction. Together with that conviction, you should also develop a sense of heedfulness. That’s what those five reflections are for—to remind you that your actions will make a difference. So you’ve got to be very careful about how you act. In fact, the Buddha says heedfulness underlies all skillful qualities, in particular the five faculties or the five strengths. They grow as you reflect on aging, illness, and death, as you reflect on separation, and then as you reflect on the tools and powers you do have to find some happiness in the midst of all this—a happiness that really lasts and a happiness that’s not going to simply slip through your fingers. This is why the Buddha has you reflect on those five things day after day after day. Because when you reflect on those, then your persistence becomes wiser. There are basically four courses of action that we face. There are things that we like to do and give good results, and things we don’t like to do and will give bad results. Those two don’t require much intelligence. The things you like to do that give good results will be very easy to do them. Things you don’t like to do that give bad results are not likely to do them. The problem lies with the things that you like to do but will give bad results, and things you don’t like to do that give good results. That is the measure of your discernment in the context of your persistence. Because persistence isn’t just brute effort. It’s not a matter of sitting for long hours or doing walking meditation for long hours. It requires some persistence that’s informed by your hatefulness. It requires discernment. It requires seeing what is skillful and what will give long-term good results. It requires also knowing how to talk yourself into wanting to do the things that, at first glance, you don’t want to do but will give good results. It requires knowing how to talk yourself out of doing things that you like to do but will give bad results. It requires being willing to do this and being happy that you’ve learned how to change your ways. So a lot of creating the right environment for yourself to practice is a matter of talking to yourself and learning to emphasize the voices that are not emphasized by the culture around you, and to watch out for the lazy voices that will use the culture or use other people’s opinions, other people’s values. To cut back on the momentum of your practice, this too is a function of hatefulness, realizing that the problems are not all out there. The big problems are here inside, and the mind is divided into diffractions. So as with any political battle, you have to take it seriously. You have to learn how to do it lightly enough so it doesn’t become grim. But at the same time, you have to watch out for the voices that say, “Hey, relax. Take it easy. Don’t be so serious about this. After all, enjoy life.” That’s their reaction to impermanence. “Life is short, so enjoy it while you can.” That’s what they say. Just take life as short, try to be as skillful as you can, work as much as you can on developing the skills you’re going to need. Because life is hemmed in with aging, illness, and death. You can’t have life without them. And if you think about life without taking them into consideration, it’s like designing a house without taking into consideration the fact that storms may come, wind may come, rain may come. The kind of house you would build that way is not going to give you the protection you’re going to need. So do your best to keep the Buddha’s values alive in your life, even as you leave the monastery. Because, after all, they are for the sake of your true happiness. The Buddha spent all that time developing his perfections as Buddha. For what? For flowers, candles, incense? No. The way you show respect to him, he said, is to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. And the purpose of that Dhamma is for your true happiness. Sometimes we get the sense that he’s more concerned about our happiness than we are. So he takes your happiness seriously. So there are proper responses for you to take it seriously, too. you

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