Learning from the Triple Training

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The Buddha’s teaching is a training. It’s a guide to action. He explains reality, the nature of action, the nature of cause and effect as it affects actions. Primarily when it’s relevant to learning how to act in a skillful way. There are a lot of issues about reality that the Buddha doesn’t touch at all. But as for action, he’s very specific about what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. There are a group of thinkers that he called “eel wrigglers” who refused to commit to any definition of what was skillful and what was not. There were a lot of questions that he himself would not answer about the nature of the world, about the self, whether it existed or not. But he had his good reasons for not answering those, because they were irrelevant to the practice. But he’s very clear on the fact that a teacher who’s going to help the student at all had to be very clear about what was skillful and what was not. Even just starting with the basic principle that there was such a thing as skillful action. Some people thought that whatever you did was already preordained. So you can think about skill or lack of skill at all. But, as the Buddha pointed out, there are influences coming from the past, but we shape them with our present intentions. So that’s what we’ve got to watch out for. We have to learn to get some order to our desires as well, because otherwise our desires pull us in all sorts of directions. And so, for the sake of the training, you make up your mind that you’re going to try to act in as skillful a way as you can. And the Buddha lays it out, what he calls training in heightened virtue, heightened mind, heightened discernment. Basically, his teaching is on virtue, concentration, and discernment. You take on the precepts, not just to be obedient, but because they are a training. You learn things about yourself. You learn that you do have the potential to act in skillful ways, but you also learn that there are going to be voices inside the mind that resist it. This is a good way of digging them out. In some cases, we’re already too painfully aware of the different unskillful voices in the mind. In cases like that, you just say, “Well, I’ll take this training for the time being.” See what it does for you. And try to get more and more skillful. This is one of the ways in which the Buddhist principle about how you learn about the Dhamma through commitment and reflection comes into play. You try to act in a skillful way, and then you reflect on the results, both while you’re doing the action and after it’s done. And if you see that you’ve actually harmed somebody, talk it over with them. If you see that you’ve harmed someone who’s more advanced on the path, get some idea of what you might have seen wrong or done wrong. Make up your mind you’re not going to repeat that mistake. If you see that no harm was done, then take joy in that fact. That’s an important way in which you learn how to train and strengthen the skillful voices in the mind. Sometimes we feel embarrassed about patting ourselves on the back for having done something well. But the Buddha actually encourages it. You need to see that you are getting better and you’re able to do the skillful thing more and more consistently. The same principle applies to concentration and discernment. In concentration, of course, there are going to be lots of different voices in the mind that say, “I’d rather think about this right now.” “No, I’d rather think about that.” You have to tell them, “No, we’re here to get the mind to settle down.” You try to breathe in a way that’s really comfortable so that the recalcitrant voices in the mind get more amenable. They’re happier to settle down, be quiet for a while at least. Because every voice in the mind is aiming at pleasure of one sort or another. If you can give rise to a sense of well-being in the mind simply by sitting here breathing, those other voices will be satisfied, at least for the moment. And then when they start getting restless again, then you’re in a better position to watch them. You look at these ideas about what it would be good to do. That’s what those voices are about. They want to give you advice about what you should be doing right now. When you have a sense of well-being inside, it’s easier to look at them with a little bit more objectivity and not feel so pressed by them. They want you to commit right now. You say, “No, I want to watch. Where are these going to take me?” They say, “I’m in a pretty good place right now. What do they have to offer that’s better?” And they’ll have their crazy ideas. But as long as you see them as crazy and are not taking in them, you’re okay. It’s when you fall in with them, agree with them, that’s when they take over. And you want to learn how to watch that. That’s another thing that you learn through commitment and reflection. You commit to being still, and then you reflect on the parts of the mind that are not still, the parts that would pull you away. And you want to be quick to see them. You say, “What is it that triggers those ideas, triggers those desires?” And again, because the mind is more settled, it’s easier to say no to the trigger or to see the trigger as something strange. We’re so familiar with our thoughts that almost nothing that comes up in the mind strikes us as strange. And so the concentration is good to give you a point where you can stand and step outside your thoughts for a while. And then when they start coming out again, you can get a sense that they really are strange. I had the advantage when I was in Thailand of being able to take some of my issues to Ajaan Phu. And sometimes he’d give me a strange look, like, “How on earth could you ever have thought of that? Or why would that be a problem?” And I, of course, having been raised in the West, thought my problems were perfectly normal. And it was good to see his reaction, “This is a strange problem you have.” Maybe you could stop and reflect. In my culturation, it was pretty strange in some ways. But you can step out of that worldview that views your thoughts as normal. Then you get outside of their power. If you’ve already been told that your thoughts are not normal, part of the mind will resist that. But then you ask yourself, “Normal for what?” Here, “normalcy” is the Buddhist normalcy. It’s not Western normalcy or Asian normalcy. It’s normalcy for the noble ones. And for them, anything that leads to suffering would be abnormal. Because thinking those thoughts is not bad. It’s just that it’s not wise. It’s absurd. It pulls you away from some of your ideas. That would be disruptive to your concentration. Then again, the same principle works for training and discernment. We’re trying to see things in terms of the Four Noble Truths, to see that our cravings are worth abandoning, and the things we cling to are worth comprehending until we have no more passion for them. That’s a tall order. Because the things we cling to are what define us. And in clinging, we’re feeding. We’re very protective of our feeding. What the Buddha is saying is that we’re protective of the things that make us suffer. Why protect them? The mind will have its reasons. But if you keep resisting them, reminding them, “Well, the Buddha says this is something you’ve got to comprehend,” they’re often quiet about their reasons. But when you force them, eventually they’ll say something. Sometimes they’ll say diversionary things to keep you fooled. But every now and then, you get a straight answer out of them as to why they want to hold on. And if you have a better place to hold on, i.e., the concentration, and better standards for deciding what should be done to your clingings and what should be done to your cravings, then those reasons they have for holding on will have less power. That’s something you have to do again and again and again. Because oftentimes they’ll show a little bit of what the allure is for your unskillful thoughts, unskillful ideas, unskillful plans of action. It takes saying no many, many times for the whole story to come out. So you work at this consistently, persistently. This is what patience means in the Buddhist teachings. Not that you sit around and you’re just okay with everything or try to put up with everything. It means you realize what you’ve got to do and just keep at it again and again and again. You don’t let yourself get discouraged. And again, as the Buddha would encourage you, when you do gain a little insight, even if it’s just a little tiny insight, take joy in that fact. The Jhammahabhava talks about how he could see just a little fleck of the bark on the tree of his defilements peel off. Learn to take joy in that fact. Because that will strengthen your resolve, that you do want to commit to being skillful. And you do want to sense that, yes, you can do this, and yes, you will benefit from it. So you commit yourself to the triple training, not just to put the mind through the grinder, but as a way of learning about the mind, seeing what gets dug up in the mind, as you at the same time become more and more sensitive to what skillful action really is, and how you can tell the skillful voices in the mind from the unskillful voices in the mind. You get those skillful voices better and better trained, so they’re stronger, more skillful, and less likely to be fooled by the unskillful voices, unskillful ideas, unskillful plans. Because we practice to learn about ourselves. We’re not trying to turn ourselves into little Buddhist robots. We take on the training to see what it reveals and also to see what it can do for us. There’s a term, patibhat, in Thai. There are two meanings. One is to practice. That’s when you practice the path. But then you can also patibhat a person. Which means you look after them. And so as you practice the path, you’re also looking after yourself, learning about yourself. Because the triple training is something you can tell yourself to do. The insights are not things you can tell yourself to do, but they will come up if you commit, if you reflect. And that’s what’s really good about the triple training. training.

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