To Purify the Heart

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When I first went to stay with John Fuya, I was attracted by his kindness, by his wisdom. And I must admit there was something about his psychic abilities that had me fascinated. This was an aspect of reality that I hadn’t really thought much about. And all of a sudden it seemed very real. And maybe I was showing too much interest in that aspect, because one night he, out of nowhere, made the comment, he said, “The whole purpose of the practice is for purity of heart, to purify the heart. Everything else is just fun and games.” That really struck me, brought me back to my senses, because that’s why we’re here: to purify the heart of its greed, its aversion, its delusion, and basically to take a noble attitude toward our suffering. You notice that the Buddha calls the four truths that he taught from the very beginning “noble truths.” They’re noble in the sense that on one end you take responsibility for your own suffering. It’s not that you’re blaming yourself, you’re not making yourself the victim. But you realize that the suffering that weighs down the mind comes from within. And that’s actually good news, because if we had to perfect the world before we could do it, the world resists being made perfect. And our idea of perfect may be very different from other people’s idea of perfect. So there’d be no end to the suffering. But when you realize it’s what you add to things coming in from outside that weighs down the mind, you can do something about that. So you’re taking responsibility for your suffering. And you’re taking responsibility for putting an end to it. And part of that is going to require that you step back from your clingings and cravings. The Buddha defines suffering as clinging to the aggregates. And the aggregates—form, feeling, perception, thought fabrications, and consciousness—those are not the real problem. The real problem is the clinging. And of course we cling to these things because we like them. We want them to stay. And yet that’s why we suffer. That is the suffering in and of itself. And we do that because of our craving. Again, we crave the things we like. So we’re going to have to step back from our likes and dislikes. That’s taking a noble attitude toward our suffering. And then the path involves developing noble attributes in the mind: virtue, concentration, discernment. These are all good things. Then you realize that you’re going to have to do the path yourself. You depend on others for their example and for their advice. But you realize that to really make a difference, you have to do the work yourself. This is why the discernment aspect of the path is not just right view. In other words, seeing things in terms of the formidable truths and understanding that this suffering is cause and this is how you put an end to it, but realizing that these are truths that you have to act on. Suffering is to be comprehended. In other words, your clinging is to be comprehended. Craving is to be abandoned. The cessation of suffering is to be realized. And you do that by developing the path. So right resolve basically says, “Let’s get started on the path.” It starts with resolve on renunciation, resolve on non-ill-real, resolve on harmlessness. Renunciation here, again, is taking a noble attitude toward your happiness. You’re not going to indulge in sensuality, because sensuality dulls the mind, obscures the mind. You’re going to try to find happiness in a way that keeps the mind clear, keeps the mind sharp. And you’re going to try to find it in a way that doesn’t depend on anyone else. As the Buddha said, so much of sensuality depends on other people doing things the way you want them to. And if they don’t do it voluntarily, sometimes you’re willing to force them, again, which is not a very noble attitude toward your happiness. But if you try to find happiness inside, you may have to force your own mind, but there’s nothing wrong with that. But it doesn’t involve forcing other people to do anything that they wouldn’t want to do. And then non-ill-real, and harmlessness, basically goodwill, compassion, equanimity. Your goodwill is for everyone. Your compassion is for everyone. It’s not partial. Again, it’s a noble attitude. This is how we purify the minds, by developing noble attitudes. And then we look at our speech. We make sure that what we say is true. There’s no intention to divide people, no intention to hurt their feelings for no reason at all. There’s no intention to fill up their ears with idle chatter. You abstain from killing, you abstain from stealing, you abstain from illicit sex. Try to find your livelihood in a way that harms no one. So you try to bring a noble attitude toward everything that you do, say, think. And then you develop your mind. This is when you get into the area of concentration practice. The factors in the path are right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Try to give rise to the desire to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful ones. This, the Buddha said, is one of the traditions of the noble ones, that you try to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities. For most of us, our delight lies in developing unskillful qualities. We like our anger, we like our desire, we like our lust. But if we realize that we really want to get beyond suffering, we’ve got to stand back from these things and say, “Do they really provide us with happiness?” And when you say that they don’t, are you willing to abandon them? You’re happy to abandon them. You’re happy to do these things. But it’s effort well spent. After all, if you’re going to take responsibility for these issues, you also have to take responsibility for keeping yourself happy on the path. Because if you’re not happy on the path, it’s not going to last. So you learn to see your ability to overcome a particular instance of anger or a particular instance of lust or a particular instance of greed. As a victory. Something to take joy in. And as you develop more mindfulness, develop more concentration, it’s hard to take joy in that, too. There’ll be challenges in getting the mind to settle down. But try to see if the challenges are something you are eager to overcome. Again, no one’s forcing you to do this. You’re here voluntarily. So you learn to work on your motivation. This is why part of right effort is what the Buddha calls generating desire. The path is going to work only if you desire to do it. So learn to talk to yourself, to think about the drawbacks of not following the path. Some people complain that the path is going to take a long time. But not following the path is going to be a lot longer. If you don’t follow the path, there’s no out. But the path at least promises an end. And as we’ve said, it doesn’t ask you to do anything that you’d be ashamed to do. It’s all noble activities. And you realize that as you stay on the path, you’re showing goodwill for yourself, you’re showing goodwill for others. You’re not weighing them down. You’re not disturbing them with your greed, your aversion, your delusion. So you realize it’s a good path all around. When you can think in these ways, then it’s a lot easier for the mind to settle down. You’re going to find some joy in being quiet, seeing it as a necessary skill. All too often people get the mind quiet and then they say, “Okay, what’s next?” Well, the quiet is what’s next. You really want to master this. Because the more you can make the mind quiet, the more you see the subtle movements that go on in there. And it’s in the subtle movements that we’re going to see our clinging and our craving at a stage where we can actually do something about them. So it’s all good. And as we engage in this, we’re purifying our minds by purifying our thoughts and our words and our deeds. When the Buddha was teaching his son from the very beginning how to purify your thoughts, how to purify your words, how to purify your deeds, we make sure that you’re not going to do anything harmful. Make that your major intention. And then as you consider specific actions, if you see anything that would go against that intention, you don’t do it. And then when you do see something that would be in line with your intention not to harm, you go ahead and do it. And then you notice it. Is it really harmless? Or is there some unexpected harm? If there’s unexpected harm, you take that as a lesson. You’ll either see it while you’re doing the action or after the action is done. And if you don’t see any harm, then he says take joy in the practice, the fact that you’re getting someplace. Following a practice that harms nobody at all. That’s something really worth enjoying, really worth being proud of. If you’re going to be proud, be proud of the fact that you’re willing to learn. That kind of pride is actually useful on the path. So these are the ways in which we purify the heart, our training in what the Buddha calls heightened virtue, heightened concentration, heightened discernment. We lift the quality of our mind. We take a mature, noble attitude towards our own thoughts, our words, and deeds. A mature and noble attitude towards our pursuit of happiness. As the Buddha said, there’s one goal that really is noble in the pursuit of happiness, and that’s the pursuit of happiness that doesn’t die, happiness that doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. It’s something that’s totally sufficient in and of itself. So there’s a noble path to a noble goal. And that’s how the heart gets purified. Thank you.

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