Fighting Skills

February 15, 2023

There was another death in our extended community today. I don’t know if you’ll mind. One of the Thai women who came up in the middle of the week, her father died and she had to go back to Thailand right away for the funeral. So we chanted for the father today. This keeps on happening. As the Buddha said, “We have to remember rich people and poor, young, old, wealthy, high-ranking, low-ranking. They all keep dying. We’re like pots, the Buddha said. Clay pots are made. You know that eventually they’re going to be broken. This is normal. That chant that we often hear,”I’m subject to aging, illness, and death.” The Thai translation is, “Aging is normal. Illness is normal. Death is normal.” But we tend to act as if these are abnormal things, and our minds get abnormal around them. This is something we have to learn to undo, this habit. We have to keep our minds normal, because this is the normal way of life. We have to live in the light of these things. Realizing that if we don’t train our minds, there’s going to be a lot of trouble when they come. That’s why we’re here meditating, to get the mind under some control. You know, the Buddha says to have a sense of samvega, which in some cases is translated as “urgency.” That gives the impression that you’ve got to rush through this as fast as you can. But this is delicate work, training the mind. It’s something as simple as staying with the breath. You stay with it, coming in, going out, and after one or two breaths you’re off someplace else. You catch the mind and you bring it back. You have to be firm but patient. It’s like training a little puppy. You can’t give in to the puppy’s whims, but you can’t be too harsh and cruel with it, otherwise the puppy will just rebel. So you have to learn the right touch. And impatience doesn’t help. It’s interesting that the Pali word for impatience covers a lot of things. A lack of tolerance, a lack of forbearance, a lack of endurance. We’re impatient because we can’t endure things. We talk to ourselves in ways that make it hard to endure. This is what we’ve got to learn how to undo. You have to learn how to talk to yourself in new ways. Usually when something comes up, you already have the different rationales for giving in. They come very quickly. But you have to ask yourself, “Have they really helped you? Are these really your friends?” We have that chant about the friends outside. Well, the same issue applies to friends inside you. You have some friends inside that are genuine friends and others that are false friends. It’s the ones that have your long-term well-being in mind. Those are your genuine friends inside. Those are the voices you have to encourage. As for the ones that you’re used to encouraging, there’s a strong sense that they’re the real you. Well, they’ve become the habitual you. That’s your normalcy for right now. But it’s not in line with the Buddhist normalcy. It is normal for the mind to be skillful to think in terms of its long-term happiness. After all, what do you want? Do you want short-term happiness that turns to pain again and again and again? Who in their right mind would want that? And yet, that’s what most people go for. And we’re all very good at focusing on the short-term. But if you really care for yourself, then that’s what having the Self as a governing principle means. Then you want to go for the long-term. There’s a passage where the Buddha says, “You reflect, ‘I came to this path because I wanted true happiness. Do I not want true happiness anymore?’” And the voices inside will say, “Well, it’s so long a path, and it’s so difficult.” Well, anything that’s long and difficult, you learn how to break it down into little bits. In other words, this step, and then this step, and then this step. One little definement shows his head, and you think about all the other definements that fall in with it, and it seems overwhelming. You have to remember that they come individually, and so you can deal with them individually. And they have a way of putting themselves in a hall of mirrors so they look like they’re really there. So you have to change your perceptions. In other words, change the way you fabricate your experience in the present moment. Look at the way you breathe. Is the way you breathe aggravating things? Okay, change the way you breathe. The way you talk to yourself. Can you learn new ways of talking to yourself? And here again, the mind will say, “Well, the way I talk to myself is like this, and that’s who I am.” But again, the way you do things doesn’t mean it has to be always that way. You learn to do things one way, you can choose to do them another way. In other words, you’re not dealing with innate qualities in the mind. You’re dealing with habits. And although it takes some time to undo a habit, it can be undone. After all, you’ve learned it. You can unlearn it. The same with the perceptions, the feelings that you have. They underlie the way you talk to yourself. What images do you hold in mind about your strength, about your endurance, and about the defilements that come? Why do you let them seem to be so much stronger and larger than you are? Well, because they’ve been stronger and larger in the past. But that’s, again, a perception that can be changed. And one way you can change it is to show yourself that you can take them apart one by one by one. And they’ll tell you, “Well, you can take one of us out, but there are lots more of us. So I’ll take apart the one that I’m dealing with right now. As for the others, we’ll deal with them later.” And at the very least, you’re putting up a fight. When you don’t put up a fight, how can you say you lose? You didn’t even try. So it’s better to try and lose than it is to not try at all. You’ve got to learn how to talk to yourself. And think about the two ways of approaching that image of a fighting spirit. Ajahn Mahambo says you basically have to knock out the enemy. And Ajahn Lee says that sometimes you learn how to convert the enemy to actually siding with the Dhamma. And which technique you use for which defilement, that’s going to depend on the situation. But have a range of fighting skills. Sometimes you’ll work primarily with the breath, sometimes with the way you talk to yourself, sometimes with changing the images you hold in mind. Especially that last one, the images. They seem to have a lot of reality. But the Buddha says, “See them as mirages. They look real, but if you go there, there’s nothing much. Sometimes it’s just a lens in the air, a lens of cool or warm temperatures. That’s all. Nothing. And it can seem so threatening, so overwhelming. You have to be like the Inuits. When Europeans were going around the world, they would talk with Native people. Sometimes they’d ask them to draw maps of where they were. And most Native people had trouble drawing a map, except for the Inuits. Their maps were extremely accurate. That was because they lived in an area where there were a lot of atmospheric effects. That’s what they called the Fata Morgana, which is basically what looks like a mountain range on the horizon. But if you go there, there’s nothing. Again, it was a lens in the air. So they learned. They had to be very careful to note where the real islands were and what the coastline was like, so they wouldn’t fall for these mirages. So think in terms of the Buddha’s analysis. You’ve got perceptions, and you’ve got feelings, and you’ve got fabrications. So when a perception seems especially large and overwhelming, especially real, you can say,”Well, this is just a perception. It’s an act of the mind.” Those feelings you have. One of the things you learn as you meditate is that you can change the potentials for feelings. Sitting in the body here right now, you’ll see there are some potentials for pain and some potentials for pleasure. Why focus on the pains? Why aggravate the pains? You can emphasize the potentials for pleasure instead. These are choices that you’re making, and part of the mind doesn’t like the idea to be held responsible. But then if you’re not responsible, then you can’t change anything. So admit your responsibility. And then learn how to use it well. That’s how we work on our minds so that they can deal with what’s normal outside, i.e., aging, illness, and death. Separation. And then with that fifth contemplation, where are the owners of our actions? We can face the fact that we are responsible for our state of mind, and we can do some good about it. That’s the hope that the Buddha offers for us. As he said, if people couldn’t unlearn unskillful habits and learn skillful habits in their place, there would have been no point in his teaching. That’s because we can learn how to change our ways. That’s why he taught. So he has that much faith in you to try to pick up some of that faith yourself.

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