Time to Practice

October 19, 2023

One day a king by sanity came to see the Buddha in the middle of the day. And the Buddha asked him, “What have you been up to?” And the king, in a remarkably frank moment, said all the typical things of someone obsessed with power, obsessed with sensuality, who’s gained control of a large sphere of the earth. The typical things of politics, desire. And the Buddha said, “Suppose there were a man to come from the East, someone you trusted, and you were to say that there’s this huge mountain moving in from the East, crushing all living beings in its path. Now the trustworthy man were to come from the South, saying that there was a mountain moving in from the South, crushing all living beings. Same for the West, same for the North. Given its terrible destruction of life, given that the human life is so hard to attain, what would you do?” The king replied, “What else can I do but dharma practice, right practice, dharma conduct, right conduct?” So the Buddha went on. He said, “I inform you, great king, aging, illness and death are moving in, crushing all living beings in our path. What should you do?” And the king said again, “What else can I do but dharma conduct, right conduct?” It’s an affirmation of the value of dharma practice, no matter what’s happening in the world. Because aging, illness and death are constants. They’re normal. We have that chant that we do regularly, subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death. In the Thai translation it says, “Aging is normal. Illness is normal. Death is normal.” And dharma practice still has meaning. In fact, it gains its meaning from the facts of aging, illness and death. We have this human life which is so hard to come by. And the best use of it is not simply trying to keep it going as long as possible. It’s to develop as much goodness as we can in terms of our thoughts, our words, our deeds. But particularly the goodness of the mind. That’s the source of all goodness. So we look inside and try to develop the good qualities we have. And an important part of this practice is having the conviction that you do have those good potentials in you, and you can bring them out. As the Buddha said, if it were not possible for people to abandon unskillful qualities, and to develop skillful ones, he wouldn’t have taught. He was a little bit discouraged in the beginning, right after his awakening, thinking of the idea of establishing the Dhamma and the Vinaya. But then he realized that there would be people who would benefit, people who would listen, open their hearts, and then change the way they behaved, change the way they spoke, change the way they thought, change the way they acted in general. So it was worth his while to teach. So think of that. He has confidence in you, that you can do this practice and you will benefit from it. And fortunately he was one of the rare founders of religion who was frank about the fact that he had started out imperfect. He knew what it was like to make mistakes, but he also had learned how to learn from mistakes. He realized that’s how you grow. It was the first lesson he taught to his son, after teaching him to be truthful. He taught him to look at his actions, and if he noticed that he had an unskillful intention, he was not to act on it. But he went with skillful or good intentions. If he acted on them and discovered that there were ways in which he caused harm, he’d stop. Or if after the action was done he realized that there was harm in the long term, he resolved not to repeat that mistake, talk it over with someone who was more advanced on the path, to get some ideas of how to stick with that resolve of not repeating the mistake. And then to keep on practicing. In other words, you trip, you fall, you pick yourself up. You admit that it was a mistake and make a determination not to repeat it. And you keep on training. As for times when you don’t make mistakes, you should take joy in that fact. There’s something in our upbringing in the West which makes us embarrassed to think about. We’re patting ourselves on the back when we’ve done a good job. We think we should be humble and be constantly looking for our faults. And it’s wise to look for your faults, but it’s also wise to recognize when you didn’t make a mistake. And to find joy in that fact, joy in the fact that you are learning. Because that’s what we’re here for. We’re here to learn. This is what makes human life good. We have this opportunity to do good. As the Buddha said, there’s a luminous quality in the mind. Which doesn’t mean that the mind is already pure, but it can observe itself. We’re not so totally bound up in our old ways of thinking, old ways of acting, that we can’t see when we’ve made a mistake. Sometimes it’s hard. Sometimes people have trouble doing this. Other people get obsessed, though, with their mistakes. But it’s that luminous quality of the mind that allows us to see a mistake. And we should learn to build on that, to encourage ourselves. When they list the verbs that described how the Buddha would teach, there are four. He would instruct. Urge. Rouse. And encourage. Four verbs. One to instruct, to give information. And the other three for encouragement. 75% encouragement, 25% instruction. When the passages in the Canon talk about his disciples teaching others, the same verbs. So think about when the Buddha says you go talk it over with someone else who’s more advanced in the path when you’ve made a mistake. That’s how he would want that person to talk to you, to instruct you as to what was wrong, and how you could avoid that mistake. And then to urge you and rouse you, to rouse your fighting spirit, and to encourage you that you can do this. So when you look at your own mistakes, try to use those same four verbs. Point out to yourself where the mistake was. Urge yourself not to repeat it. Rouse your fighting spirit that, yes, you can do this. And encourage yourself all along the way. That’s how you internalize the Dharma. We read the standards that the Buddha gives for how to behave in a daily life in terms of the precepts, in terms of sensory restraint. His instructions for how to train the mind, to be mindful, to gain concentration. And he sets a high standard in all those areas. Sometimes it’s easy to get discouraged, thinking that you can’t do it. But that’s not how he would teach you. He would instruct you on those high standards because they are possible, and they’re worthwhile, no matter what else happens in the world. It’s following this path that gives meaning to your life, gives value to your life. In that question he gave to the king, he asked him, given that the human state is so hard to attain, a lot of people would think, well, just do what you can to hold on, to stay alive. But the human state is so hard to attain. You have to ask yourself, well, what’s good about it? What’s good about it is the opportunity to develop your good qualities in the mind. And part of developing those good qualities is that you treat other people well. You’re generous with them. You’re principled. You’re good in your interactions. But also, you train yourself. You see which seeds there are in the mind that could lead you to do unskillful things. And realize that getting down on yourself, denigrating your ability to practice, that’s unskillful. The skillful approach is always to say it can be done. I may not have figured it out yet, but there must be some way to do this. Other people have done this. This is the conceit that Benarola Nanda recommended. Other people can do this. They’re human beings. I’m a human being. Why can’t I? Encouraging yourself, and maintain your focus, that what makes human life worthwhile, and what gives you value as a person, is your ability to learn how to be more and more skillful, and how to find better and better ways of looking for happiness. Better in the sense that the happiness is greater, and in the sense that it doesn’t cause any harm to anyone. There is that possibility. The way of the world is that, as the Buddha once said, everything has been laid claim to, so if you want anything, you’re going to have to fight other people off. The way of the Dhamma, though, is that goodness is wide open. It’s always an opportunity. So keep encouraging yourself. Encouraging yourself in that direction. Because that’s where happiness is. It doesn’t have to fight anybody off. It actually radiates its goodness to others. In the same way as when matter enters into a black hole, it releases a lot of radiation. You brighten your mind, and you brighten the world around you. This world, which can be such a dark place, is brightened by those who practice.

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