

Mental Balance

May 7, 2005

The Buddha told a story one time of two acrobats, a teacher and his student. The teacher tells the student, “I’m going to climb up to the end of this bamboo pole, and I want you to climb up on my shoulders. Then you look out after me, and I’ll look out after you, and that way we’ll come down safely.” And the student says, “No, that won’t do. I have to look out after myself. You have to look out after yourself. And that way each of us, by looking out after ourselves, will protect the other, so we’ll be able to perform our tricks and come down safely.” The Buddha added that, in that case, the student was the one who was right. After all, for an acrobat, the number-one issue is keeping your balance, and you can’t look out after somebody else’s balance. As long as you’re focused on your balance, you’re not going to throw the other person off. In that way, by looking after yourself, you protect the other person.

The Buddha went on to say that it’s the same with the practice. When you look out after yourself, you’re looking out after others. But then he went on to say that there are also times when, by looking out after others, you look out after yourself. The important thing is that he doesn’t draw a clear line between the two. There’s that old complaint that Theravada is selfish, that you’re just looking out after yourself, but as the Buddha said, you can’t help but help other people when you really are careful, when you really are meticulous, when you really do look out after your own balance. All the good things the Buddha has us practice—generosity, virtue, cultivating the sublime attitudes, getting the mind into good state of concentration, developing insight, gaining release: The primary focus is on what they do for your mind, but in each case, you’re not only helping yourself. The people around you benefit as well.

With generosity, the dual benefit is obvious. One the one hand, you create a more spacious mind for yourself. If you’re stingy, if you’re always worried about hoarding things, your mind gets more and more narrow, more and more fixated on things, and it’s a very unpleasant mind to be in. But if you can learn to be generous, the mind begins to open up. It’s a more spacious mind, a more comfortable place to stay. At the same time, people around you benefit from the things you give them.

The same with the precepts: You look at your behavior when you’re following the precepts, and there’s really nothing with which you can fault yourself.

Particularly when you've been able to do the right thing even when it was hard, there's a sense of self-worth, a sense of dignity—that word we tend to forget.

Another word we tend to forget is nobility. Dignity and nobility are qualities that come with the precepts, having principles in your actions, and holding on to them no matter what, whether they're convenient or not. This way, you don't harm other people, and you yourself can learn to trust yourself. If someone gives you a million dollars to lie, you can say No. That means that your virtue is worth more than a million dollars. You've got something really valuable inside.

The same when you develop the sublime attitudes: Your own mind becomes more spacious, and you're less likely to harm anybody. On top of that, the Buddha notices that when you develop unlimited goodwill, unlimited compassion, appreciation, equanimity, if you've got any past bad karma, the effects, if they hit you when your mind is in expanded state like that, won't be nearly as strong.

He makes a comparison a large salt crystal in water. If you put the salt crystal into a small glass of water, you can't drink it. It's much too salty. But if you put the same salt crystal in a river, you can still drink the water, because there's so much water there. It dilutes the salt so that it doesn't really make that much difference. He says it's the same with the mind that has that unlimited quality of the sublime attitudes. Any past bad actions whose results hit you, when your mind is in a state like that, don't hit you nearly as hard. Sometimes you barely notice them at all. So this is another practice the Buddha recommends in which you benefit, and the people around you benefit as well.

When the mind gets concentrated, again, your immediate benefit is that you have a sense of well-being inside, a sense of stability, a sense of peace. As the Buddha said, there is no happiness other than peace. Once the mind has that sense of stability, there's a good place where it could rest, a sense of fullness and rapture that comes along with it as well. That rapture, the Buddha said, is food for the mind. When the mind is well fed like that, you don't have to go out feeding on other things outside. Your mind doesn't have to prowl around looking for other people to do this, that, and the other thing just the way you want it to be done. You're less of a burden on them.

The same holds true with discernment—and, of course, with release, when you don't have to feed at all anyway. You're no longer a predator. From that point on, all you have is things to offer to other people: the wisdom you've gained, the insights you've gained. You've got a lot more to share

So this is the Buddha's vision of the path. It's one in which there's no sharp line between your benefit and the benefit of the people around you. But the focus is working on your qualities of mind, because that's the prime thing you're

responsible for. The things other people are going to do and say and think, you can't be responsible for them. Only when you force someone else to do something against their will: That's when you're responsible for their actions. But there are so few cases in the world when you can really do that. But your actions, your words, your thoughts: These things you *are* responsible for, always. So if you take good care of these, it's like the acrobat maintaining his balance. You don't throw anybody else off balance and you yourself are safe.

So value this practice. The more meticulous you are in looking after your own mind, that better the results are going to be. All the Buddha's teachings are meant to focus your attention right here on what you're doing right now—both what you're doing and the results that are coming from what you are doing. The teachings on emptiness, not-self, all of what seem to be more abstract teachings, are ultimately meant to focus your attention back here. Where's the stress and suffering? What is the action that's causing the stress and suffering? When you see it, you stop it. The more meticulously you can watch this one topic, the better the results are going to be. The more you're acquainted with your own mind, the better the results are going to be.

So everything focuses here. All your activities as you live here at the monastery, are meant to focus here on the mind. Not only while you're sitting here meditating, but also with all the other activities, you want to stay in touch with the state of your mind as precisely and meticulously as possible, because this is the source of pleasure or pain for which you're responsible. Learn to value it; learn to give it the importance it deserves.