

Resources for Endurance

August 20, 2007

Sometimes it's shocking to read what the so-called experts have to say about the Buddha's teachings. This evening I was reading a piece by a famous professor, saying that in the Buddha's teachings, intention is everything in determining whether an action is good or not. The results don't matter. But that's not what the Buddha taught. If you look at his teachings to Rahula, his seven-year-old son, he said to look at your intentions and also to look at the results of your actions. If you've done something, even though it was with good intentions, but you see that the results were harmful, you go back and have a look at your intention again, because maybe the intention was based on delusion. Even though it may have been a good intention, it wasn't skillful.

Skillful intentions have to be free from delusion. To get past delusion, you have to take the results into consideration as well. This is how we learn whether our intentions are skillful or not. You look at the results of your actions. That's the test of everything in the Buddha's teachings. You test his teachings by seeing the results they give. You test your understanding of his teachings by seeing, when you put them into practice, what kind of results you get. If the results aren't good, then you have to go back and check your understanding.

You see this in the meditation. Our initial intentions are good here: We sit to get the mind quiet, bring the mind to concentration, gain insight. If everything depended just on the quality of the intention, that'd be all you'd have to do, just hold on to that good intention. But the question is, does it work? A lot of times, other things need to be brought in as well. You check the results of your actions: How are you focusing on the breath? What happens when you focus on the breath in specific parts of the body? Which parts seem to give the best results? The conception of where you are in the body, or what kind of breathing is good for the body: You've got to check those by looking at the results.

You also have to take into consideration the fact that not everything you're experiencing right now comes from your present intentions. Sometimes past intentions are involved as well. One of the most difficult parts of the practice is to sort out which is which. Even though we come to the practice with good intentions—to put an end to suffering, to be as harmless as possible—the Buddha never promises that the path is going to be easy. And for every good intention you have—especially if you have a long-term intention, the type of intention he calls a determination, when you make up your mind that there's something you really

want to work toward—you're going to have to meet up with obstacles. But there's going to be pay-off.

With every good thing you intend, everything good thing you determine, there are going to be difficulties. He never promised an easy ride. The trick then is how to minimize the difficulties, maximize your strengths, so that you can overcome the difficulties. In Thailand they have a statement that if there's no Mara—in other words, no obstacles in your path—you'll never develop your perfections. The perfections include things like endurance and truthfulness. You make up your mind you're going to do something and you stick with it. There's also relinquishment. There are certain things you've got to give up in order to practice, in order to stick with those good intentions.

The trick is learning how to maximize your friends. Over the weekend, there was someone talking about the difficulties he was having at the office, saying how the question of bringing goodwill to a very difficult situation meant that you had to ignore your conditioning, ignore the conditions around you. But that was a misunderstanding. You've got to see that in a larger sense you do have other conditions. There are not just the immediate conditions around you. You've got some inner resources you can draw on and some outer resources you can draw on as well.

Our problem, given the situation when we seem to be surrounded by difficulties, is that we often tend to forget that we do have support—external support, internal support—and those conditions sometimes get ignored. If you think of each present moment as elements coming in from the past plus elements coming in from the present, the elements coming from the present are your present intentions. Things coming from the past are things that are happening *to* you, and also the qualities of mind that you carry around with you, your understandings, your inner strengths. Those are potentially there as well. And the question is, which of these past influences are you going to nurture?

You can think of yourself as having a big seed bank. The question is, which of the seeds are you going to bring light to, which of the seeds are you going to water? Emphasize the skillful ones. Endurance, or patience—the word *khanti* in Pali—doesn't mean that you just simply sit through and weather things, gritting your teeth and trying to hold out as best as you can. It means realizing that you also have positive things you can draw on. The situation has both good and bad, so when you look, you've got to look for the good, nurture the good. Sometimes you look around outside, and there doesn't seem to be much good out there, you've got to find some good inside.

This is why we practice, to develop those inner qualities: the strength, the fortitude, and the discernment that help us to see what we can draw on, what the positive potentials are within any situation, so that when you have to make a trade-off, you're not constantly focused on the difficulties. If you focus on the difficulties, it just makes it harder and harder to deal with the situation. Focus instead on what good potentials you have.

Recently—I don't know why it is—in the past couple months, people have been asking me what was the hardest part of the practice for me when I was over in Thailand. I really had to stop and think, and then I realized the fact that I had to stop and think was probably the answer. I never focused on any one particular thing as being the most difficult part. Difficulties came up, you dealt with them as they came, you did what had to be done, and you tried to find what strength you had to muster, so that you weren't focused on how difficult it was. You were more interested in the challenge to your ingenuity in figuring out: What can I draw on here to see me through the day, to see me through this situation?

In other words, even though there are difficulties, you don't focus on them to the point of weighing yourself down. You look at the positive aspects, the good that's coming from your skillful intentions. You weigh that against the problems that come up.

There's that passage I refer to many times in the novel my friend wrote about ancient China. The principle is that if you want any happiness in life, you have to decide that there's one thing you want more than anything else, and you're willing to sacrifice everything else for that one thing. There's a lot of truth there. But the trick is learning how to make the sacrifices in a way where you don't feel the sacrifices like a knife being plunged into you every time you make the sacrifice. You learn how to remind yourself of the good that's coming from the skillfulness of your intentions, the good you see actually happening, and the good you anticipate.

As the Buddha said, this is a sign of wisdom: When it's a difficult decision but you know it's going to lead to good results down the line, you can focus on those good results in such a way that you can stick with that good decision, that good intention, that determination you've made.

This is why, for instance, when we're practicing here, we know that an important part of the practice is learning how to comprehend suffering. But then you look the path, and it's not all suffering. You have right concentration, which provides a sense of ease, a sense of rapture. You learn how to develop these things so that you have strengths to draw on, so that when suffering comes up, you're not totally surrounded by it. You realize you've got at least some part of the territory

on your side. There's a potential for rapture, there's a potential for ease inside that you can draw on. Don't let the story or the narrative of the outside world hide that potential from you. You want to keep that potential always in mind, so that the outside story doesn't overwhelm you, that you've got your inner resources that are independent of the story, or at least there's another story line that's going on at the same time. You work on those potentials, you draw on them when you need them.

This is why the skills of concentration are not meant to be practiced only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed. You work on them now because you have fewer distractions. But you want to keep in mind that these are skills that you can apply to any difficulty. It's like practicing a music instrument. You go off and you practice in a quiet room, with nobody else around. But eventually you've got out and play that piece in front of other people. So you want to be able to learn how to transfer the same focus that you have when you're quiet into another situation where there are lots of people focused on you and the emotions that come up when you're in the midst of the situation with a lot of the people around you. You've got to learn how to not nurture the difficult emotions that are going to get in the way of a skillful reaction. Nurture the skillful ones instead.

Remind yourself that you've got both inside. Sometimes an emotion comes flaring up and you think that's your real feeling at that particular time. Well, it's one of the potential feelings, and this one that happened to get the water and the sunlight. You can think of it as a seed and you've got to decide: Is this a good emotion to go with, or is it going to get in the way? Try to look for the good alternatives as well. Nurture those instead.

So there are many potentials within the mind at any given time, many potential conditions. This is one of the central insights that the Buddha has about causality, is that our experience of the present moment is shaped not only by past intentions, but also by current intentions, and one of your current intentions is which past potentials are you going to focus on, which habits of yours you're going to focus on, which parts of the many narratives going on in your mind, which narrative are you going to focus on. Remind yourself you have lots of choices.

Another question that came up over the weekend was: In this tradition, what's the role of a teacher? One of those roles is to remind you that you have more potentials than you might have thought, more possibilities in any one situation than you might have thought. If you want to internalize a teacher, that's one message that you can carry around with you: There are more potentials here in any given situation than you might be seeing, so look for them. You've got the way

you're breathing, which is something we tend to overlook in difficult situations, but it's probably one of the most important things you can carry into a difficult situation: Learn how to breathe with a sense of ease, and when the world is bursting into flame around you, you've got something cool inside.

There's the way you can frame the situation, the labels you're putting on things: There's lots of freedom of choice here. The situation is not a given. You can help shape it. The more you keep in mind the fact that there are lots of potentials that you can draw on, the easier it's going to be to find a skillful response to put up with the difficulty and yet not feel overwhelmed by it. Even when the situation is bad, you can make the best of it, so that you can maintain the determinations you've made, the ones that are for long-term welfare and happiness for yourself, for the people around you. Even though there may be sacrifices that have to be made, you see that the sacrifice is well worth the effort, that the results that come out are going to be good and lasting.

So the challenge of the practice is learning how to bring up the skillful response no matter how difficult the situation is. And the possibility that the response will be skillful is increased when you realize that there's a lot more you've got going for you than you may have thought. Always keep that in mind.