

The Escape of Discipline

October 11, 2008

“The world is swept away,” the chant just said. “It does not endure.” So what are you going to find of enduring worth in your life?

Look at things outside. You can depend on them for some things, but for a really deep sense of security they don't have much to offer. Physical things can get destroyed. Relationships can end. Society as a whole can break down. Even mountain ranges get worn down eventually.

In a lot of cases we can say, “Well, that doesn't matter as long as it lasts long enough for me to find some happiness.” The wearing down of mountain ranges doesn't really impact our lives that much. But most of the things in which we do look for happiness change so easily – our own *bodies* change all the time, to say nothing of the things outside. So we've got to look inside if we're going to find any stability, any security in life.

All of those passages we chanted just now, the four Dhamma summaries, come from the story of Ratthapala, a young man who came from a very wealthy family. He heard these teachings from the Buddha and he realized, “I can't stay at home. If I want true happiness, I've got to go out and become a monk.”

And whether or not we want to become monks or nuns ourselves: the important thing for all of us is that he knew he had to look inside, had to train his mind to be reliable.

Because you look at your mind and there's thinking all over the place. It can sabotage its own best interest very easily. But, as the Buddha said, the mind can be trained, and the trained mind is a source of true happiness.

All too often we balk at the idea of training the mind. We don't like the sound of the words “discipline” and “training,” having to force the mind, control the mind. It's as if we're being put back in school. Not only school – military school, where they put you in a straitjacket.

That's what it sounds like – at least that's what our defilements tell us that it sounds like. But then again, what are our defilements? They're pretty harsh taskmasters. They can force us to think all night long and get no rest at all.

So the choice is not between the confines of discipline and the freedom of letting the mind wander around. The choice is between the hope that discipline offers for a way out, as opposed to the continued slavery of craving.

In the story, Ratthapala talks to an 80-year-old king. The king says, “What is this, ‘The world is a slave to craving’?” The king of course, being king, doesn't think he's a slave to anything at all.

So Ratthapala asks him, “Suppose a trustworthy person were to come from the east and say there was a great kingdom to the east, very wealthy, all sorts of things that you could take for your own. And with your army you could conquer it. What would you do?” The king said, “Oh, I'd conquer it.”

“Then another person says, ‘There’s kingdom to the south: great wealth, more than you could want. And with your army you could conquer it.’ What would you do?” Again, the king says he would conquer it. The same with a kingdom to the west, a kingdom to the north, even a kingdom from the other side of the ocean.

In other words, the king would be a slave to his craving for more and more and more, even though he was 80 years old and already had more than plenty enough.

It’s interesting to note how the kings in the Pali Canon are often representatives of the untrained mind: It has a lot of power but the power can destroy it.

So this is the beginning of wisdom: when you see that the mind has to be trained. And the Buddha keeps encouraging us that it can be done, and that the training doesn’t have to force you to eat nothing but bread and water and sleep on a plank, wear a hairshirt.

In fact, the first factor of the path that the Buddha discovered is right concentration: ease, pleasure, rapture, filling the body.

Then there are the other elements of the path as well: Virtue for instance, abstaining from harmful behavior. And although parts of the mind like to engage in harmful behavior, when you think of your position in life as a whole it’s always good to be able to look back and say, “I didn’t do anything harmful. I didn’t hurt anybody. I didn’t hurt myself.”

That ability to have no regrets, *genuinely* no regrets: Some people try to fake no regrets by going into denial, but that doesn’t help. To look back on your life and genuinely see that there is nothing with which you could blame yourself in your behavior: That’s a treasure right there, a very strong form of happiness.

Then there’s the happiness that comes from understanding, from discernment: seeing where you have habits that cause unnecessary stress, unnecessary suffering, understanding why you do them, and understanding how you can drop them. A great sense of relief and release comes with that.

So the training that the Buddha offers is not three hundred spears a day. The path itself—even though it may involve some difficulties in training your habits, changing your habits—does give a great sense of relief, a great sense of respite, ease. You look at yourself and you can have strong self esteem.

All of these things are designed to make the path a path that’s really good to walk, good to follow, bringing the mind to a place where it really is free from harm: experiencing no harm, causing no harm. A deep sense of well-being comes with that.

So the difficulties of the path are in the beginning—it’s not always going to be hard. The difficulty lies in going against your old habits, that’s all. They make it seem harder than it actually is.

So on the days when the practice seems to get a little dry, remind yourself that at least you’re on a path. And the path is going someplace, is going someplace good.

You look around you, at the paths that most people are following, and they meander around without going anywhere in particular.

Even though there may be difficulties sometimes in picking yourself up and raising the level of the mind: Once you get there, you realize that it’s more than worth the effort. Just

being able to get the mind to settle down and be with the breath, get absorbed in the breath, and allow that sense of well-being to fill the body: You're moving the mind from what's called the sensual level to what's called the level of form. Issues of the world can just drop away. You've got a sense of well-being that comes from within and it's immediately felt. You don't have to depend on situations outside to keep that sense of well-being going: It's a purely internal sort of thing.

In the beginning, it does depend on having the right environment, the right friends, a quiet place to meditate without distractions. But as your ability gets stronger, you can carry that well-being wherever you go. You don't have to keep reading the newspapers to see what the stock market is doing and what's happening here and there in the world, because your happiness doesn't depend on the things here and there outside but on what's right here inside, right here at the heart. That takes a huge load off the mind.

So remember that the choice is not between the freedom of your natural way of doing things versus the constraints and confinement of training. The real choice is between the continued confinement of being under the thumb of the defilements as opposed to the possibility of release that comes with the training. The training may involve confinement in the beginning as you have to get the mind to settle down and learn new habits. But then the path opens wider and wider, bringing more and more freedom.

So make sure that you keep that image in mind. All too often we set up false dichotomies—for instance that the only choices we have in the path are either to be neurotic, intense in our effort, or to be relaxed and open, and not strive at all. If that were the only choice, of course, you'd go for being open and not striving. But there are other choices as well. You can be open and relaxed and not striving and get nowhere – that's a possibility. Or you can work, put in an effort in a way that's enjoyable and it really leads someplace.

So make sure that you understand what the genuine alternatives are. If you find your mind arguing that it doesn't want to follow the path, remind yourself of what the actual alternatives really are. The opportunities that come from training the mind will always win out when you're honest with yourself.

So try to foster this quality of honesty in everything you do. The part of the mind that says, "Well, try this a little bit of lust or anger, it shouldn't matter": Is that a part of the mind you can really believe? You may want to believe it but your genuine interest knows you can't.

Heedfulness is the source of what's skillful. Carelessness and complacency: That's not the path at all. Heedfulness sounds strenuous but it's got a lot of friends. Virtue comes as one of its friends, concentration, discernment, release—all of which give great happiness as you follow the path and even more so as you reach the goal.