Put Some Heart in Your Practice

April 16, 2025

In Thailand, it’s very easy to find people who like to make merit, but who don’t like to meditate. Here in the West, it’s the other way around. It’s easy to find people who want to do insight meditation, but don’t want to bother with making merit. They see that it’s a lowly practice. It has nothing to do with the intellectual activity that goes into developing insight. Of course, both attitudes are wrong. The practice of merit is a basis for the meditation. It’s part of the training of the citta. You have to remember that this word means both heart and mind. So we’re not training just the mental faculties that we think of when we think of the mind. We’re training the heart. And a lot of the training of the heart has to do with generosity and virtue and development of universal goodwill. And it’s a necessary part of training the mind as well. As the Buddha said, if you’re not generous, there’s no way you’re going to get the mind into the right concentration. Because generosity requires a certain breadth of heart, where you’re not concerned only about yourself, but you want to think about other people too. Because you realize that if your happiness depends on the suffering of others, it’s not going to last. So when you’ve found something good, the wise attitude is to want to share it, not just hold it for yourself. So getting the mind into concentration requires an attitude of generosity. The same with virtue. Virtue is perfected at stream entry. It’s a high level of attainment. Again, virtue is partly a quality of what we say in the mind. When you see that if you want your actions to be the type that allow you to settle down, you want to make sure they don’t harm anybody. But also just the happiness that comes from realizing you haven’t caused any harm. It helps get the mind into concentration. When the mind is settled down and you want to see the mind in action, it’s best when you’re trying to do something good and you have been doing good things. The mind when it’s virtuous, the heart when it’s virtuous, is a lot easier to see than when it’s been doing harmful things. So that quality of the heart that goes into virtue is a necessary prerequisite for insight. Otherwise, the mind hides things from itself. It goes into denial. It’s like a scar. Either it’s an open wound and you try to avoid it, or it gets covered with scar tissue and you pretend it’s not there. And neither attitude is going to help get the mind into basic mindfulness practice, to say nothing of the insight that is required for the first level of awakening. As for generosity, the Buddha says that’s perfected with non-return, an even higher level. When you give, not because of any idea of getting anything out of it, but total giving away. Now to get up there, to get to that level of generosity, the Buddha says there are good ways of motivating yourself in terms of thinking what you’re going to gain from the act of generosity. The lowest level, of course, is thinking, “Whatever I’m giving away, I’m going to get back through the principle of karma, hopefully with interest.” But there are higher levels as well. Giving with that attitude is better than not giving at all. But the higher levels think about how just giving is good. Now you don’t feel right if you have more than enough of something and other people are lacking. All these are higher and higher motivations. But there’s still an element of thinking, “I’m going to get something back.” But when you finally reach a non-return, there’s no need to think of getting anything back, because your awakening is guaranteed. So you give totally away. So these qualities of the heart are related to stages of awakening. The stages of right view. You see, this is especially when the Buddha talks about thoughts of goodwill. He said, “If you think that ill will is appropriate in any situation, that’s wrong view.” Your tendency to dismiss other people, to say that they’re not worth your attention, they don’t deserve to be happy, that’s ill will. So that’s wrong view. It makes it impossible to get on the path. So we develop generosity, we develop virtue, we develop thoughts of universal goodwill, as part of the total training of the heart and the mind together. We here in Theravada are also often accused of just looking out after number one. Well, there are skillful and unskillful ways of looking out after number one. The unskillful ones, of course, have to do with a certain narrowness in your attitude, where you don’t care about other people. You don’t want to go out of your way to help. That is very unskillful, and it’s not going to get you anywhere on the path. But if you realize that your happiness is increased by looking after the happiness of others, in the appropriate way, that way of looking after number one is actually skillful, and it’s actually successful. You look after your own interests. As the Buddha said, you develop qualities of goodwill, kindness, patience, equanimity. As the Buddha said, patience is the highest form of austerity. In other words, it’s what burns away the mind’s unskillful attitudes. And equanimity is found in many of the lists of the qualities you’re trying to develop as you meditate, both in the heart qualities of the brahmavaras and in the more head qualities, the factors for awakening. So in dealing with other people and trying to help them as best you can, it will require patience, because people are difficult. And if you say, “I don’t want to help people because they’re difficult,” then you’re going to miss a lot of the training that your mind needs. Same with equanimity. People are going to say and do things that you’re not going to like. And if you make that the excuse for not helping them, then who are you going to help? You’re certainly not going to help yourself in the right way. So the training requires both the heart and the mind. And the basic training in virtue, generosity, developing thoughts of goodwill, is not a lowly training. It’s what keeps the training well-rounded. Otherwise it’s lopsided. Like a person who exercises some parts of the body and other parts doesn’t exercise at all, it’s going to be hard to walk straight. You want to exercise all the good qualities of the heart and the mind. And only then will any of them have an opportunity to succeed.

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