The Rewards of Stream Entry

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Focus on your breath. As for any noises outside, just let them go past. As John Chah used to say, “It’s not that the noises aren’t disturbing us, we tend to disturb the noises.” In other words, the mind makes comments on it, and then those comments are the things that disturb the mind. So just let the noise go. Just go through. You stay with the sensation of the breathing coming in and going out. Allow it to be comfortable. When you focus on the breath, try not to tense up around the breath. Think of the spot where you’re focused as spreading out, spreading out. Whatever energy is there gets spread out. So you can suffuse the body. With a sense of well-being. And then you try to maintain that. This is what we do with the path. We maintain it. As the Buddha pointed out, the different Noble Truths have different duties. You’re trying to comprehend stress and suffering. See where it comes from. When you see where it comes from, you see the different types of craving that lead to that stress, and you can abandon them. Now you do that by developing the path. The one Noble Truth where you don’t have to do much is to realize the cessation of suffering. Because it’s not something you have to fabricate. It’s not something you have to put together. It just is. So work on the development, work on the maintaining. In other words, if good qualities are not there in the mind yet, you try to give rise to them. And when they’re there, you try to develop them, maintain them, so they grow. Now there will come points in the path where you don’t have to do any more maintaining of certain things. The Buddha talks about the different levels of awakening, or the different paths, noble paths and their fruits. The first one is called stream entry. The image is of a stream, that once you enter the stream, you’re going to end up in the ocean for sure. It may take a long time, it may take a short time. But the Buddha says that someone who’s reached this particular level of the practice is guaranteed full awakening within seven lifetimes. In other words, seven lifetimes can be human lifetimes or heavenly lifetimes. If they’re heavenly lifetimes, they’re going to be long. Lower than the human. That’s a guarantee. And we read about the qualities of a stream enterer, and sometimes it seems a little bit disappointing. It says that they’re confirmed in their conviction in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. And they have precepts that are pleasing to the noble ones, untorn, conducive to concentration. We look at ourselves and say, well, we have conviction in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha too. And we’ve observed the five precepts. What’s the difference? Well, the difference is that stream enters have reached a point where they don’t have to keep on maintaining these qualities. They don’t have to work on them. Their attainment is that they’ve seen the deathless. That guarantees their faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. The Buddha was right. There really is a deathless happiness that you can attain through the practice. He was right. The Dhamma is right. And all those who have reached that attainment since the Buddha, following the path, that’s the noble Sangha. They’re right too. Which is why they say that a stream enterer’s conviction is verified. The same with the precepts. They’ve seen the power of their actions. Their actions are what put together their experience of the six senses. When there’s no intentional action in the present moment, all the six senses fall away. And you have an experience that you realize that you could have had this many times before, but you kept ignoring it. There were things that got in the way. What got in the way were your own unskillful actions. So as a result, you would never intentionally break the five precepts again. Which means that stream enters don’t have to work at these things anymore. Well, we’re still working. Just the other day I had someone ask a question, “How can you continue to believe in the principle of karma when you see so many cruel and evil people getting rewarded?” That doubt gets into the mind. And even for people who have been observing the precepts, that doubt is still there sometimes. And for a stream enterer, that doubt is gone. There’s no way it’s going to come back. For the rest of us, there can come times when life gets really, really bad. And you look at yourself and you say, “I haven’t done anything really bad. Why am I experiencing all this trouble?” There are also times when society breaks down and you realize that if you don’t steal, you’re going to starve. Are you willing to starve? Some people say yes. Other people say no. But your unwillingness to break the precepts is something you have to work on. That’s the difference. So do your best to work on these things. Keep reminding yourself that when the Buddha talks about the results of karma, he too said there are times when people get rewarded for breaking the precepts. He gives an example of someone who kills somebody, kills the enemy of the king, and the king rewards him. He steals from the enemy of the king, the king rewards him. He sneaks off and has sex with the wives of the enemy of the king, the king is happy, gives him a reward. He tells a joke that involves a lie, but it amuses the king, he gets a reward. And he gets drunk together with the king, the king likes him, he gets rewarded. We see this in life all the time. The question is, are we going to let that discourage us? We have to remember when the Buddha talked about the results of karma, he didn’t say that they’re going to be instantaneous. It’s not the case that you break a precept and lightning strikes you. Sometimes nothing happens for a long time. But that potential for bad results is there. And it will ripen at its own pace, depending on the other things you do. So it never gets erased. So you’ve got to learn how to talk to yourself. To maintain your sense of conviction in the principle of karma, your conviction in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, and in your willingness to make sacrifices for the precepts. Again, think of the long term. There are people who get rewarded for breaking the precepts. We see this every day. When they get into power, they can make life miserable for everybody else, but they seem to be happy. Again, that’s seeing things in the short term. This is why conviction requires a sense of faith in the Buddha and in the principle that if you believe in the power of your actions, and that’s something you want to believe in, then you have to accept some of the consequences. And one of them is this. Our actions are complex in giving the results. Sometimes it takes time. So you’re sitting here receiving the results of past actions and present actions. Sometimes it’s hard to tell which is which. But when you see that something’s coming up in the mind that you didn’t have any intention to have come up, just write that off. That’s the result of past karma. Now the question is, what are you going to do with it? Because what you do with it is your present karma. That’s something you can change. Faith in the principle of karma makes you more heedful here in the present moment. And that’s all for the good. There are people who say, “I can’t believe in the principle of karma. I can’t believe in the principle of rebirth, because there’s no empirical proof for these things.” Well, the Buddha never said there was going to be empirical proof. What he offers is a pragmatic proof. The pragmatic proof is this. If you believe in the principle of karma, have faith in the Buddha’s awakening, what kind of person will you be? What kind of action will you do? What kind of actions will you avoid? Then you realize you’ll become a better person. Years back I was talking to a group of people who had a club. You see them all around. They’re the year-left-to-live clubs. And I told this one person, if it would be really interesting to, instead of getting around and saying, “Well, suppose you have only one year left to live, how would you live your life?” A better thing would be to say, “Suppose you really believe in karma, in rebirth, how would you live your life?” A year later, the person came back to me and said, “When you first said that, I didn’t like it. So I asked myself why. I realized that I would have to become a better person.” Well, that’s the whole point. The Buddhist teachings are here to make you a better person. Because in becoming a better person, you’re more able to put an end to suffering. When you observe the precepts, the mind is more at peace. It’s more at peace with itself. There may be some sacrifices, as I said, but you haven’t sacrificed your inner goodness. When you maintain your inner goodness, it’s a lot easier to settle down with a sense of well-being. And whatever discernment comes up in a mind like that, it’s going to be a lot more honest. So we believe in these things because they make us behave better, make us behave more skillfully. Because we see the importance of our actions. Bit by bit, this gets confirmed as we follow the path. And to finally get to that path called the path to stream entry, where all the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path come together, and they yield the fruit, an experience of the Deathless. Something that’s outside of space, outside of time. It’s not even in the present moment. The present moment, of course, is part of time. But this is something different. It has nothing to do with the Sixth Sense. It has nothing to do with the Sixth Senses. Yet there is an awareness. It’s called consciousness without surface. The Buddha’s image is of a light beam that doesn’t have to land on anything. Because it doesn’t land, you can’t see it. It’s only when a light beam lands on something and reflects that you can see the light. But that doesn’t mean it’s not there. You don’t have that experience. When you come back to the Sixth Senses, you realize how much pain and heaviness there is in the Sixth Senses. Even in pleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tastes, sensations. So as the Buddha said, stream-enterers are complete in their development of virtue. And they have some concentration and they have some discernment. Concentration that enabled them to get the mind to settle down. At least that long. They haven’t mastered concentration yet. That comes later. And they’ve had the discernment that allows them to let go of the path after they’ve developed it. Which allows them to have at least a taste or a glimpse of the Deathless. It’s called the Dhamma-I. You see it, but you’re not fully immersed in it. But that does have a huge impact on the mind. So in the Buddha’s sense that people like this have completed their virtue, their virtues are pleasing to the Noble Ones. And they have confirmed conviction in the Buddha. It’s not a small attainment. It’s a major milestone in your practice. That you don’t have to work at these things anymore. You work at the more subtle and delicate levels of practice in terms of concentration and discernment. But the bases are now taken care of. And they’re solid. Because they’re based on an experience outside of space and time. So things in space and time can’t erase that. So the qualities of a stream-enterer are actually more impressive than they sound at first. And as we reflect on them, we realize these are things we still have to work on. We’re not complacent about our conviction in the Buddha, Dhamma, and the Sangha. Because there might be events that would shake that conviction. Because it’s not well founded yet. It’s like a house that’s built on rickety supports. A little bit of wind, or maybe a flood, can wash the house away. So you have to do your best to keep on fixing the foundations. Making them as strong as you can. The same with your precepts. The Buddha said stream-enters are virtuous, but they’re not made out of virtue. Which means they don’t build a sense of self around their virtues. Which of course tells us that if we haven’t reached that stage yet, we have to keep on building an identity around, “I’m a virtuous person. The behavior that would break the precepts is beneath me.” Have that sense of shame. Have that sense of pride. Lowly actions, pride, and your sense of your self-worth. Work on maintaining that. As Venerable Ananda once said, “You have to have a sense of conceit that you’re capable of doing this.” You can build up a sense of conceit around your precepts. Not so much that you’re better than other people, but that you don’t want your behavior to be influenced by people who are not following the precepts. Keep telling yourself, “I’m better than that. That’s not the kind of person I am.” So do your best to maintain your conviction. Do your best to maintain your virtue. As long as they’re not fully established, you’ve got to keep looking after them. It’s only then that you have some hope for safety.

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