The Joy of the Battle

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The Buddhist definition of “right effort” includes the phrase “generating desire.” The desire to prevent unskillful qualities from arising, or if they’re there, to get rid of them. The desire to give rise to skillful qualities, and then when they’re there, to maintain them and develop them to the highest point of their development. The desire is important, because without it, the path is not going to happen. And the desire needs to be fed by joy. You have to enjoy what you’re doing. And so you have to train yourself to enjoy doing these things. Because it doesn’t come naturally for most of us. We enjoy our cravings. We enjoy our clinging. In fact, that’s why we crave, and that’s why we cling. Somebody’s asking us to change our allegiance. Craving has been our friend for a long time, or at least we’ve taken it as our friend. It’s the kind of friend that whispers in our ear, “Do this. Break this law.” Then you break the law, the police come, and the friend disappears. Then it comes back later as if nothing had happened. It tells you to do something else. So you’ve got to learn to divorce yourself from that false friendship. And as with any friendship that has proven to be false, it takes a while. And it hurts. But you have to learn how to overcome that sense of hurt with a sense of exploration. You’re learning new things. Now they may not necessarily be the things you want to learn, or you’ve set your mind to. But you’re set your mind on learning. In other words, you’re sitting here meditating, focusing on the breath. And we have visions of nice states of concentration, bliss, ease, expansive, full-body awareness. And yet we find ourselves doing battle with the hindrances. Sensual desire comes up. Ill will can come up. Sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety. Doubt and uncertainty. And instead of blissing out, we find ourselves doing battle with these things. You have to remind yourself that it’s an important part of the practice to learn how to do battle with them. Because for most of our lives we’ve been giving in to them. And so even though you’re doing battle and you’re not getting anywhere, it seems, at least remind yourself you’re taking the right tack. You’ve learned to divorce yourself from your old allegiances. You’re trying to develop some new ones. And so every time that you try to fight them, see that as a good thing. As the Buddha said, every skillful intention that comes into the mind, every intention to abandon something unskillful, or to develop something unskillful, that initial intention right there is good karma. And whatever extent you’re able to carry through with it, that’s more good karma. There have been times when it seems like you can’t get a handle on something. At least remind yourself, I’m here to do battle with this. And whatever extent I can figure it out, it’s all for the good. Because after all, the hindrances are not only a block to concentration, they’re also food for ignorance. The big problem. So you’re not dealing with just little things. You’re dealing with the big problem that causes us to suffer. As the Buddha said, you can trace back, way, way back, and you cannot find a beginning point for ignorance. Even he couldn’t find one. And his memory of previous lifetimes was very, very long. But he says you can see what’s sustaining it. You can see it from moment to moment, right here. It’s these hindrances. So when you’re dealing with them, it’s not a little thing. So even though at the end of the hour you reflect, and you realize you were doing battle with, say, ill will, or doing battle with sensual desire, for the whole hour, at least you were doing battle. You weren’t giving in. The Chandra Mahābhūra compares it to learning to be a boxer. If you don’t put up a fight, how can you say that you lose? You’ve totally surrendered. Because even when you fight somebody and you lose, you’ve learned something about that person. And the same with hindrances, when you lose out to them. If you’re observant, you realize, “Oh, I fell for that because of X, I fell for that, this other one because of Y.” This is why the Buddha says that the Dhamma is nourished by commitment and reflection. Not only in the sense that you commit yourself to doing something, and you see that you made a mistake, and you learn how to correct on reflection, you learn how to correct for it, but simply the fact that you learn how to reflect on your mind, and you say, “OK, I lost because of this. I gave in to this particular idea.” Because all the hindrances have their arguments. They have their reasons. They may be foolish, but they’re clever. Sensual desire especially has lots and lots of reasons. And it’s going to take a while to work through all of them. They’re not infinite in number. But they’ve easily had you fooled. And you’re trying to figure them out. And when you can get one reason, you say, “Oh, I thought that this particular type of desire made me attractive. This particular desire appealed to this, this, this.” You’ve learned something important. It’s like learning a language. You don’t learn the whole language all at once. You learn it a few words at a time. And sometimes it may seem like you’re never going to master the language. But each word you learn is important. And you find that the mind, as it reflects on what it’s learned, begins to see connections, begins to see patterns. And that’s when the language becomes yours. It’s the same with the practice. As you begin to see the patterns, not the patterns that have been pointed out in dharma talks or pointed out in books, but just seeing, “Oh, this is how lust overcomes my mind. This is how ill-will overcomes. When sleepiness comes, this is what I give in to.” For example, sleepiness. One good way of dealing with it is to ask yourself, “Well, when it comes on, what are the feelings in the body that send messages up saying, ‘Hey, hey, hey, you’re sleeping. Time to rest. Time to zone out.’ What physical sensations tell you that?” The same with anger. The same with worry. When you’re worried about something, what part of the mind feels that it’s virtuous to worry? It feels that you’re really accomplishing something. Ask it questions. By worrying, do you really ward off the danger? Are you really being responsible? The same with lust. When it says something is attractive, what’s attractive about it? We’re talking today about how when you’re dealing with craving of any kind, you have to be able to locate it. Exactly where is the craving located? This is part of that analysis the Buddha gives about finding the allure. What exactly is attractive about craving? It’s thirst. It dresses up things really, really fine. So you reflect. And part of reflection is asking questions. And when you have a glimmer of an answer, don’t dismiss it. Again, it’s like learning a language. You learn one new word today. Well, don’t think, ‘Well, I didn’t learn much.’ You’ve added something to your repertoire. And although the path may be long, if you’re doing it one word a day, one step a day, still you’re headed in the right direction. There’s that story of the monk who was in the forest. His meditation was not going well. And off in the distance he heard a village festival. People were singing, dancing. There was music. Probably getting drunk. He thought to himself, ‘These people, they know how to have a good time. Here I am, miserable and alone in the forest.’ A deva appeared to him and said, ‘You know how many people are out there who envy you? Some of those are going to hell right now. They really wish they were in your place, because at least you’re headed in the right direction.’ So remind yourself, you’re headed in the right direction. It may be slow, but at least it’s better than heading in the wrong direction and going fast. So what you realize, part of this reflection is, as I said, asking questions. Part of it is learning how to talk to yourself. Find something to give yourself encouragement. When I was alone on the hill there in Wat Namasatit, there were times it seemed kind of futile. And that was back in the days when hardly anybody was going to Thailand to ordain. It was a weird thing. My father was embarrassed about what I was doing. People would ask him, ‘What is your son doing in Thailand?’ He said, ‘He’s studying.’ He didn’t want to divulge more than that, because his older brother had kept saying, ‘Well, when is Jeff going to grow up?’ So that was, those thoughts were bouncing around in my mind. I had to realize, what do these people know? My uncle was a professor, but what does he know about the Dhamma? What does he know about training the mind? He didn’t know anything. So part of it is learning how to fend off the voices that discourage you. And think about little steps that you’re making in the right direction. And learn how to take joy in that. Think of where you would be if you were not on this path. There are lots of other paths, and they don’t go to good places. Somebody said there’s the path that goes to a pit of burning embers is the path that goes to a dried up forest. The path that goes to a cesspool. You’re not on those paths. You’re on the path that goes to a lake with refreshing trees around, cool water that you can bathe in. That’s the Buddha’s image for nibbana. Totally refreshing. You’re headed there. So even though the progress may be slow, and it may seem you’re actually not progressing, sometimes, and again, it’s when you’re learning a language, this period when it seems to be going backwards, but it’s actually getting more grounded. You learn things, and then you have to master them. That means going back over what you did before. And getting really good at it before you can move ahead. So when you find yourself dealing with the same old defilement every day, realize at least you’re trying to figure it out. The fact that you’re going against it again, and again, and again, that’s a good sign. So take heart, and think about the way the Buddha would teach his monks. Sometimes he’d instruct them, then he’d urge, rouse, and encourage them. One part information, three parts encouragement. That’s the recipe for learning how to enjoy the effort that goes into the practice. How to find joy in the effort. So nourish your practice with commitment, and then reflection. Learn from your mistakes. And if you’re going to identify with any sense of who you are as you practice, make it the person who’s always willing to learn. No matter what happens, you’re willing to learn. And that’s going to see you through. (crickets chirping)

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