

Cultivate a Limitless Heart

November 24, 2015

We each have our own sufferings that no one else can feel. And the work to put an end to suffering is often something that no one else can even see. As we're focused on our own issues, things can get very narrow. On the one hand, it is good that the sufferings that weigh down the mind are things that come from within, because otherwise we'd have to depend on the help from somebody else outside to put an end to them. It's good that we can put an end to them ourselves. But there are times when the practice can seem very narrow—face-to-face with our own sufferings, face-to-face with our own stupidity basically. As Ajaan Suwat used to like to say, "Ignorance is basically stupidity." Fighting off our defilements, some of which we really like, is difficult work. But it's important that we keep our work in perspective, so that the mind doesn't become narrow, the heart doesn't become narrow.

So reflect on that passage in the chant we recited just now: "Cultivate a limitless heart." A limitless heart is expansive and doesn't see things just from a narrow perspective. It has to see a wider perspective. In other words, our individual issues are not the only issues in the world. The people around us have issues, too. And we have to have some compassion for them. At the same time, they can be very irritating people. So a limitless heart is good in that it's limitless not just in its compassion, but also in its endurance.

How you develop that? Well, paradoxically it's by focusing on little things and having the right attitude toward little things.

To begin with, some things are little but you tend to see them as big—bigger than they really are. It takes some effort to see that they're actually little and minor and that your heart is much bigger.

Think of that passage in the sutta where the Buddha says to make your mind like earth. Someone can come and spit on the earth and dig around in the earth to try to make the earth not earth or to be without earth. But that person's efforts are really small and pitiful, because the earth is just so huge. "Make your mind like space." People can try to write and draw pictures on space but there's no surface on space, so the pictures have nowhere to stick. "Make your mind like the River Ganges." It's a huge river. Someone could take a torch and try to burn up the river but he'd never get even a little bit

burned away. You want to make the mind that impervious, that solid. This is an issue of endurance. Patience. It's important to see that patience and endurance are very intimately connected with goodwill: You can maintain your goodwill because you can put up with a lot of the stuff that's out there in the world and it doesn't make you wish ill for anyone.

We don't pretend that the people around us or in the world at large are all wonderful nice people, that they're all well-intentioned – they're not. People have all kinds of intentions, and we can't be responsible for or control their intentions. But we can be responsible for our own intentions, and we can make our mind large. We wish them goodwill not because they're good but because we want to have that power of endurance so that the things that other people do to us are not going to have that much of an impact and persuade us to do unskillful things.

So those are the types of little things that you want to keep little: the things other people do, that they say, the way they infringe on your boundaries, where they go against your idea of how things should be done. Learn to regard those actions with some compassion, learn to regard them with some endurance. Don't let little things like that blow up to become big things. Little issues that would destroy the harmony of the group: Keep them little and make your heart large so that you can endure them.

There are other little things, though, that you tend to overlook because they seem so minor, and yet you really should focus on them—because this power of endurance, this limitless heart, doesn't start at the edge of the universe and work in. It starts here and moves out.

One way of starting here is to look around you and see what needs to be done. There are lots of little things in the monastery that are not assigned as tasks. We each have our own duties, but don't think that just doing your duty is enough and then you can go back to your hut, go back to your tent, and shut out everything else. Sometimes you look around and see that something a little extra needs to be done. So you do that. *Then* you go back to meditate.

We've got a rainstorm potentially coming up tonight. One of the things you should do is look around you. What needs to be put away, what needs to be fixed, in case there's rain? Or when you walk down the road and there are some weeds – and as a monk I can't tell to pull out the weeds – but the weeds are there and, as they say, you can contemplate them. You don't have to wait for someone else to tell you.

Paying attention to little things like this makes life a lot easier for

everybody else around. Little things you can do for people, behind their backs, the nice things: Those really make the life at the monastery a lot better for everyone. Many of us think that the atmosphere is friendly when we sit around and chat a lot. But that doesn't make things friendly. That can actually make things unnecessarily complicated. What makes things friendly is when you find that someone's done some little nice thing for you behind your back—or has taken care of some little detail around the monastery, not necessarily for you, but you can see, "This person cares about the monastery, this person cares about the community." That's what creates harmony.

So, paradoxically, the limitless heart that we're trying to cultivate here focuses on small things of this sort: the small favors we can do for one another, the small tasks we can do—not because they're assigned but simply because we see that they need to be done.

That opens our own perspective. I remember reading years back of a Western monk who had gone to Thailand. He was saying that originally he looked down on some of the other monks and nuns in the monastery because they'd spend a little time puttering around, taking care of this little thing, that little thing. He felt he was doing some much more important work: He was going to go straight to nirvana, he wasn't going to go puttering around. But then he found pretty quickly that his practice got dry. He realized that the other people puttering around were actually doing something useful for their own minds. They were developing good qualities. They weren't going dry. These are perfections: patience, endurance, goodwill, compassion. They all go together and they all help with the meditation.

When you focus on doing the little good things, that strengthens your mind and develops the attitude of a limitless heart. In other words, you're here not just to do an assigned job and forget about all the other things that need to be done. You don't have to fill your day with tasks but just notice little things that need cleaning up, picking up. When you've done your job, say, at the kitchen, your job in the afternoon, look out for any detail that still needs to be taken care of. Do a couple of extra things every day. Get yourself *out of yourself*. And it's in doing the little things that larger qualities develop.

Ajaan Lee makes this point in one of his Dhamma talks. He commented that the Buddha was an enormous person. In his words, he said, "His eyes were enormous: They could see the entire world. His mouth was enormous: He could give a Dhamma talk that people

continue to repeat thousands of years later.” Then he asked, “How did the Buddha get large like that? Well, first he focused on small things.” He made himself totally unimportant. He left the palace, rejected job offers from kings, made himself totally unimportant. There’s even a passage in the Canon where he says that sometimes he’d be out in the forest meditating and young boys who were herding cows came by. They would see him and just for the fun of it they would urinate on him. And he endured that.

In other words, by making himself unimportant he eventually made himself very important. He focused his attention entirely just on his breath. Remember that passage from Stephen Colbert talking about Buddhism and asking, “You wrap yourself in a cloth, you sit under a tree, and you *breathe*?” Well, yeah. You get really good at something really small like this and then, as Ajaan Lee says, your goodness explodes and becomes a limitless heart.

So have the right attitude toward small things: both the small things that should remain small and the other small things where you realize, “Okay, by focusing on these small things I’m enlarging my heart.”

That’s one of the best techniques for getting yourself out of the suffering of the path, or the suffering of your own sufferings: by making your mind and your heart so much larger than all the irritations inside and outside can ever be.