The Power of Human Effort

February 8, 2013

Every evening, we have chants in honor of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, recollecting their virtues before we meditate. This is a good way of uplifting the mind—or as the texts say, gladdening the mind. These recollections put you in the right mood to meditate. You think about the kind of person the Buddha was, the person who found this path. You think about how good the Dhamma is, and how noble the example of his noble disciples.

Of course, each of us will have particular stories or particular aspects of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha that we find especially inspiring. It's good that you read up on the life of the Buddha, that you read the Dhamma, and you learn about the noble disciples, both in the time of the Buddha and in more recent times, as a way of giving energy to your path. Then you can choose the incidents that you find inspiring. When you find the meditation's starting to get dry or repetitive, you're reaching a plateau, or you've been on a plateau for a while, you can call on these things to help. Not that the Buddha's going to come down and help you, but your memory of his example, your memory of the Dhamma, your memory of the example of the Sangha will help uplift your practice.

One of the things I've always found inspiring about the Buddha was his conviction that human effort can make a difference. And that's an important point to keep in mind: He wanted to make a difference. All too often, we hear that the teaching is about acceptance, and although it's true that there are some things you have to accept, you basically accept principles of how things work and how things don't work. Then you try to *use* those principles.

In the case of the Buddha, he used those principles to put an end to suffering. He saw that the things he was pursuing were all subject to aging, illness, and death. He himself was subject to aging, illness, and death, so there was nothing really worthwhile about the pursuit because it was all going to end in nothing. But what if there was something that didn't grow old, didn't age, didn't get ill, didn't die, didn't change? If there were such a thing, wouldn't that be worth pursuing? He wasn't 100 percent sure that there was such a thing, but he figured that he'd much rather give up his life in the pursuit of that idea rather than just let the possibility hang there in the air without being tested.

This is another aspect of the Buddha that's really admirable, his willingness to test things, particularly his actions. He'd notice there was something wrong with the state of his mind—something not quite satisfactory. So he'd ask himself what

he was doing that was creating that state of mind. Why was he acting in a way that wasn't giving satisfaction? Could there be another way? Then, as he said, there were two qualities that motivated his path. One was lack of contentment with skillful qualities, and the other was relentless effort.

In other words, the Buddha never let himself rest content with how well his mind was—unless it was really, really good. If there was any smidgeon of stress or suffering or anything less than ideal in the state of his mind, he wanted to figure out how to get past it. But always, the question was: "What am I doing?" That question started with very basic things in terms of the words he was speaking and the actions he was doing with his body, all the way into the movements of the mind. It's through that testing and questioning and experimenting, again and again and again, that he finally found awakening.

And he made his mistakes along the way. We know about those six years he spent with austerities. It's a sign of his admirable character that he was willing to recognize that as a mistake at the end of six years. He thought to himself: There'd never been anyone who had devoted himself to austerities more than he had. There are people who, if they had come to that point in their practice, probably would have just stayed right there. They wouldn't have wanted to admit they'd made a mistake. After all, they'd devoted all that time and suffering.

And what would keep you going for six-odd years like that if not a sense of pride in your ability to handle these difficulties? It would have been all too easy just to hang on to the pride. But he realized that that wasn't going to get him anywhere. He realized that he'd have to change his practice and disappoint a lot of people who really believed in austerities. But he was willing to make the sacrifice. Again, it always came back to, "What am I doing that's not quite satisfactory yet, and what can I do to change it and make it better?"

There was one alternative that he never explored, and that was the idea that human effort can't do anything. In fact, after his awakening, it was one of the few issues that he would actually go out and debate people on. Most of the debates we see in the Canon are people coming to the Buddha and taking issue with something he had said. It's very rare that he goes out and asks people, "I understand that you've been saying x. Is that really true?" They would say, "Yes, it's true," and then he'd argue with them. The few cases where he did that all had to do with the power of human action—involving people who said that actions had no consequences or those who said that you don't really act on your own. Everything you experience is the result of either some impersonal principle or something you did in the past that you can't change. Or some God has decided that this is the way things have to be.

So everything the Buddha taught and exemplified in his actions had to do with the importance of action—that it really does make a difference what you choose to do.

If you look at the way he talks about discernment in the beginning levels when he's talking to his son, teaching about the basic principles of the practice, he says you look into your actions as you'd look into a mirror. You cleanse your mind by cleansing your actions. First you focus on your intentions, what you expect to gain out of what you're doing. Don't do an action if you anticipate it will cause harm. While you're acting, you try to see what immediate results you're getting, and then when the action is done, you look at the long-term results. If you saw that it was a mistake, if it caused affliction either to yourself or to someone else or to both, you resolve not to repeat that mistake. If you can, you talk it over with someone who is more experienced on the path.

Even when you get into the more subtle levels of practice, it's all a question of action, fabrication, *saṅkhāra*. These are intentional actions—like when you're focusing on the breath right now. The in-and-out breath is called the bodily sankhara. It's one of the few processes in the body that you actually can exert some conscious control over, and it shapes your experience of the whole rest of the body.

There's verbal fabrication: the things you say to yourself as you're watching the breath. You focus on one aspect of the breath and then you evaluate how things are going. Is the breath comfortable? Is it not? Is your focus solid, or is it not? Is it too light? Too heavy? Could you be focusing some place else? Could the breath be doing something else, going in a different direction? These are things you have some control over.

If you find that the breath is going well, how do you maintain it? And as you maintain it, how can you maximize the benefits that come from it? This relates to mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions, the labels you place on things in the body and mind. You see this most clearly as you're working with the breath energies in the body. Parts of the body that maybe you never thought of as having anything to do with the breath: Try labeling them as "breath." There's still breath; there's breath that goes around in circles; there's breath that comes in and goes out—all kinds of breath energy in the body. If you change your perception of how you sense the body and what it is that you're actually sensing when you sense the inside of the body, try to look at it through the lens of being breath energy of one kind of another. You find it really does change the way you relate to the meditation, the way you relate to your body, and the ability of the mind to settle down and have a sense of broad but focused awareness in the body.

As for the feelings, you notice they're feelings of pleasure or feelings of not-pleasure. How can you maximize the pleasure by the way you focus on the breath, by the way you breathe?

All of these things are issues of fabrication. As the Buddha said, we suffer because we fabricate our experience—but not out of whole cloth. We fabricate it out of potentials that come from our past karma, yet our present actions play a huge role in shaping the way we experience things. Most often, we do it out of ignorance, which is why we suffer. But if you bring knowledge to these fabrications, they can bring an end to suffering.

So it's all about action, starting from things you do and say as you engage with other people, to the things you think in your ordinary everyday life, to the things you think when you're meditating—the things you notice, the things you perceive and feel when you meditate. All of these have an element of fabrication, i.e., there's an element of intention in them. Understanding that and wanting to fabricate well to the point where you can bring the mind to something that's unfabricated: That's the skill of the path. That's what discernment is all about.

When you think about the Buddha's life and the example he set, it can't help but bring you back into the present moment—what you're doing right here and right now—because everything in his life was about the importance of action, the potential of action, how far your actions and efforts in the present moment can take you.

When you think about his unwillingness to settle for second-best—or whatever that's not first-best—that gives you the energy and gives you the motivation to try *your* first-best each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. That's the kind of reflection that can gladden the heart and give energy to your practice.