

Trading Up

November 18, 2018

Of the different factors of the path, the one that gets the least interest in Western Buddhism is right resolve. And particularly, one form of right resolve: the resolve for renunciation, i.e., renouncing sensuality. With resolve for non-ill will and resolve for harmlessness, even though they might be difficult to maintain at all times, at least people for the most part see that they're a good thing. Whereas with the resolve for renouncing sensuality, a lot of people have trouble even seeing that it's good, much less giving it a try.

But according to the Buddha, it's ideally the first reaction to hearing about the noble truths. You realize that suffering comes from things that you're doing, and many times they're things you like, so you realize you have to give up some of the things you like if you want to stop suffering. That comes hard.

We like to think that awakening is something you can simply add on to all the pleasures of life—that it somehow makes the various pleasures of life even better. You taste the raisin more intently, you appreciate the cup of tea more deeply. But raisins and tea are sensual pleasures, and renunciation is about giving up your attachment to sensuality. Not so much the pleasures, but more deeply: your fascination with thinking out and making plans for beautiful sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations—the things you'd like to have or experience. You can spend long hours engrossed in different fantasies about what you'd like—but there's nothing there! The Buddha compares sensuality to a dream. In a dream you see beautiful things, but when you wake up from the dream they're not there.

But more than that: To gain the sensual pleasures you want, you often do unskillful actions. And then, if you have something that somebody else wants, they're going to try to take it away. So you have to fight them off or else give up the pleasure. That's another one of the Buddha's images: A hawk is flying off with a piece of meat, and other hawks, vultures, and crows come and try to tear it away. If the hawk doesn't let go of the meat, it'll get torn, too. So, you have to see that giving up sensuality is a good thing.

Now, to do this, you have to have a good solid grounding in concentration as an alternative pleasure. As the Buddha said, you can gain insight into the drawbacks of sensuality, but if you don't have the alternative pleasure of intense concentration, you're just going to keep going back to your old ways of feeding off of sensual thoughts.

So focus on something here in the present moment that's not a sensual pleasure, but is a pleasure: the way you breathe. And if you're not sure that the way you breathe is a pleasure, try holding your breath for a while. Finally, when you can't hold it any longer and you start breathing in, the in-breath feels really good.

This pleasure is called the pleasure of form. It can be very intense, if you sit with it long enough, but it's still a pleasure of form: the form of the body as you feel it from within. It's not sensuality. It gives you a place where you can look at your sensual pleasures and fantasies, and ask yourself, "Do I really want those?" When you're hungry, everything looks good, everything looks like food. But when you're not hungry, you begin to distinguish: this is food, this is not food, this is good food, this is bad food, this food may taste good, but it's going to be troublesome as it gets down into your intestines. You can see these things a lot more clearly. This is one of the reasons why we come to meditate.

Now, simply meditating, getting the mind into concentration, will not be enough to go past sensuality. Even with this pleasure, it's very easy to fall back, because our sensual attachment is very deep rooted. This is where another quality has to come in, which is tenacity—realizing that even though the mind may slip back, that's not the end. Even though the mind may currently not want to give up those things, it's not always going to be that way. But it takes persistence on your part, that you're going to stick with this, stick with this, stick with this. And again, the pleasure of the concentration, when you get it, will help.

A question always comes up: "How can I have more patience? Quickly, tell me now!" That's impatience asking the question, and of course you can't learn patience through impatience. You have to learn it by developing patience, and a big aid is finding out where your skills are, where your strengths are. You may be weak in some areas, but you've got your strengths, and those are the things you lean on as you try to develop more persistence, more patience, more tenacity, more endurance. If all you can think about are the things that weigh you down, the things that are difficult, they get overwhelming. But when you remind yourself that you've got your strengths, you can hold onto those. You can build on those. And even though the difficulties may be just as difficult, the mind is not overwhelmed. In other words, it doesn't overwhelm itself.

Years back, someone once asked me, "What was the most difficult part of being in Thailand?" And I had to think, and think, and think, and I couldn't think of any one thing in particular that was most difficult. But I also realized, the fact that I couldn't think of it was a good sign. I hadn't focused on the difficulties. They were there, and I felt them, but I never let them overwhelm me.

I decided that the skill of meditation was what I wanted, and I found that by making the breath interesting, and treating this whole question of how to relate to the breath energy in the body a puzzle—a puzzle that I was constantly interested in, constantly learning more things about—it kept me from focusing on the difficulties. I was more interested in what I was learning. So try to find something in your meditation that you find continuously interesting. After all, it is your mind. It's the way your mind relates to your body.

That's one of those issues about which nobody has ever written a book that's fully exhausted the topic. How is it that we have this physical body, and we have this mind, and they're related, yet they're very different things. What is that relationship? Why does the mind come in and lay claim to the body? How does it do that? These are things that should be really fascinating, because they lie at the very core of our being, our sense of what we are.

And that's our big problem: our sense of what we are. That's one of the big obstacles, deeper even than sensuality, that's going to lie in the way: why we want to identify. What does it mean to identify? How do we do it? How do we let it go?

Because as the Buddha said, once you identify with something, you become a being, and a being has to feed. As you start feeding, you're going to get into conflict with others. And even when you're not in conflict with others, the simple fact that the mind keeps needing to feed again, and again, and again—and that's on top of the body's need to feed again and again: That's a burden.

Is there some way that we can learn how not to have to be a being, and not be afraid of being annihilated? That's a question you can look into as well, as you get deeper and deeper into the relationship between the mind and the body, or between the mind in its own actions. So there's a lot to see here, a lot to explore.

If you get bored with the meditation, it's a sign that you're not really looking, and you're not really asking the right questions—you're not paying attention. If you pay attention, you begin to realize that even though the goal may not seem very nearby, there's a lot to learn about your body, a lot to learn about your mind in the meantime. This is one of the luxuries of having a place like this. We don't have to spend all our time worrying about making money or all the other responsibilities of lay life. We've got the luxury of time. So take advantage of that. There's a lot to learn here.

Even though we've given up a lot to come here, the trade is more than worth it. When I was first ordained, the rules chafed a lot. Couldn't do this, couldn't do that, but then one day it really struck me: "With the rules, I'm given this luxury of time." In fact, it seemed sometimes as if I had more time than I knew what to

do with. In the modern world, that's a rarity and it's a real luxury. But don't just simply wallow in the luxury. Learn how to make use of it. You've got the time, you've got the opportunity, you've got the solitude to look inside, to get to know yourself well.

Ask yourself: Why are you feeding on sensual thoughts? Why are you feeding on your sense of who you are? What are you getting from it? Is there some way to go beyond it? These are really fascinating questions if you can get into them, and they're really worthwhile as well.

So renunciation is a trade—a trade up, if you do it right.