Appropriate Attention

September, 2001

It’s very common when we come to the practice that we come with very strong notions of who we are or the kind of person we’d like to be. “I am this sort of person. I want to be that sort of person.” This type of thinking is very common. And yet it’s not all that helpful. Because our concept of who we are is very nebulous, based on all kinds of information and misinformation. And often gets in the way of doing what’s the best thing to do at any given moment. This is why the Buddha says to put those questions aside. “Who am I? Who am I going to be? Who have I been in the past?” Not only in the philosophical or abstract or metaphysical physical sense, but also in the psychological sense. Just look at what you’ve got right here, right now. What opportunities you have right here, right now, for thinking, acting, and speaking in skillful ways. That kind of question, “What’s the most skillful thing to do right now?” is a useful question. This is what the Buddha was getting at when he said that you put thoughts of “me, myself, what I have been, what I will be” aside. And you think in terms instead of the four noble truths. Because these are truths that are a way of looking at your experience that focus on the issue of skillfulness directly. In other words, you look at your experience in terms of four variables, cause and effect on the one hand, and skillful and unskillful on the other. The truth of the person and the noble truth, the truth of suffering and stress, that’s an unskillful result. The unskillful cause is craving and ignorance. On the other side, you’ve got the path of practice. That’s a skillful cause, and you’ve got the cessation of suffering as a result. So whatever situations present themselves to you, just ask yourself, “What’s the most skillful thing to do right here?” And allow yourself to think in terms of the four noble truths. The teachings on meditation are not necessarily there just to be followed. One, two, three, four, and bingo! There you are. You’ve got the results. You’ve got to keep reflecting on what you’re doing, what results are coming, what adjustments have to be made. And if things don’t seem to be working, use your ingenuity. There are general parameters that you have to stay inside, like when we’re practicing meditation, you want to stay in the present as much as possible. Okay, what do you have to do to stay in the present? Sometimes the mind just refuses to settle down. So you find other topics aside from the breath and the present moment to focus on. If you’re really having trouble focusing on the present, think of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Those are ways of getting conviction in the path, getting conviction in your own ability to practice the path. After all, the members of the Noble Sangha are human beings just like you are. They started out with all the strengths and weaknesses you have, and somehow they were able to use those strengths to overcome those weaknesses in the face of all kinds of odds. If they could do it, you can do it, too. Think in those ways for a while until you get more encouragement on the path. Then you can get back to your practice. Or if you find yourself getting complacent and lazy, you can think about death for a while, because death could come at any time. It’s right here in your breath. If you breathe in and can’t breathe out, that’s death. If you breathe out and don’t breathe in, that’s death, too. Then you notice the way you breathe. You breathe in to a point where it’s not comfortable anymore to keep on breathing, and so you stop. Then you start breathing out. You keep running into that point of pain each time you have to change, or that point of discomfort. It may not be blatant pain, but there’s a sense of tension. It’s right there all the time. If the events of the past few days have confirmed anything, it’s how fragile everything can be. Death comes very easily. A little clot gets the wanderlust in your bloodstream, starts wandering around, decides it’s going to settle down and get lodged in a capillary here, a capillary there, and that’s it. Some strange vagrant germ finds its way into your body, and that can be it, too. Little tiny things can lead to death. The body is so fragile. So the question is, have you completed the work you want to complete? Do you have any idea what work you do want to complete? When you figure that one out, you can get to working on it. The most important work, of course, is straightening out your mind, because that’s what you’re going to take with you when you live or die. So if you find yourself being complacent, think about death for a while and then get back to the practice. In other words, you use as your tools whatever is close at hand. Don’t believe the rule that meditation can involve thinking. Sometimes you do have to think in ways that will bring you back to the present moment. Some people complain about the Buddha’s teachings on past lives and future lives as a distraction from the present, but when he talks about past lives and future lives, he keeps coming down to the principle of karma, that all the past, all the future, and the present, everything is shaped by your choices. What choices are you responsible for right now? Well, the ones in the present moment. He gives you those teachings in order to bring you back to the present and leave an even greater sense of its importance. So there are times when you have to use skillful thinking in order to get past negative thinking. If you find that the narratives of your life or the issues in your life are just too sticky to let go of easily, then think about using your powers of thinking in skillful ways. That gets you around those narratives so you can come back to the present moment with the proper context. So you make use of what you’ve got. That’s a sign of discernment. And discernment isn’t built except by using it. No matter how strong or weak it is, you’ve got to take what you’ve got and put it to use if you want it to get stronger. If you sit and wait for it just to get strong on its own without you using it, it’s just going to waste away. So even as you start out meditating, okay, you run into distraction. There are lots of ways of dealing with distraction. One is just to catch yourself wandering off, bring yourself back. Another way is to reflect on the drawbacks of that distraction. If you kept thinking in that direction, where would it take you? Is that where you want to go? Or, if it’s really insistent, you can say, “Okay, the distractions just keep going on in the background, but I’m going to stay here with the breath in the foreground.” Consciously ignore it. Don’t get involved. Because it’s like a tar baby. If you even try to push yourself away from it, okay, you’re going to get stuck. Some thoughts are like that. Some thoughts all you have to realize is, “Okay, it’s tense to think in this way. Let’s just relax the tension that’s associated with the thought and go away.” There are all kinds of ways of dealing with distraction. Don’t feel that you only have one tool. You’ve got to use all kinds of tools. Because they’re all available. So each time an issue comes up in the mind, just stop and ask yourself, “Okay, what’s the most skillful thing to do here?” And if an immediate answer doesn’t come, well, try experimenting. How do you think the Buddha found the path? Through experimentation. After he set out his teachings for everyone to see, each person has to experiment to see which way the teachings are best applied in his or her particular circumstances. If you don’t have this willingness to make mistakes and learn from them, it’s going to be very difficult to make mistakes. You’re not going to make any progress on the path. That’s what they mean by “beginner’s mind.” Being open to the possibility that maybe the only way you’re going to learn here is to make a few mistakes. And once you start learning from them, then you become wise. So the basic question is always, “Okay, what’s the most skillful thing to do here? What tools do I have? What exactly is the problem?” And then work through that. You don’t have to get involved in questions about who’s doing the solution, who’s facing the problem. What range of tools does this or that type of person have? Just put that thought out of your mind. And you find that the practice does begin to progress, simply because you’re not carrying a lot of unnecessary baggage around.

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