Flotsam & Jetsam

November, 2001

There are two sides to the meditation, the tranquility side and the insight side. And a lot of the insight has to come from the tranquility. It’s a combination of two things. One is getting the mind to be still, and then secondly, learning how to ask the right questions. The Buddha sets them out in the Four Noble Truths, questions related to suffering and the end of suffering. And he sets out other questions. If they relate to this issue, okay, they can be useful. Otherwise, you want to put them aside. And you look at the questions that most of us ask ourselves in the course of the day. They really are distractions. We’re worried about what this person thinks about us, what that person thinks about us, what this person’s going to do, what that person’s going to do, why they did something in the past. As the Buddha said, the real cause for suffering isn’t out there. It’s inside our own minds. So you want to focus on the questions that keep bringing you back to your mind. What are you doing right now? What are the results of what you’re doing? Can you see that clearly? If you can’t see it clearly, try to make the mind more still. When it’s still, you can say, “Okay, can you keep it still for a while?” See what happens when you try to keep it still. In the beginning, it’s going to be difficult, because the mind’s not used to being still. But you work at it, day after day after day, and finally it becomes a whole set of new habits in the mind. Of course, it would be nice if it were a nice, steady progress. It has its ups and downs. But over the long run, if you keep at it, the mind will find it more and more natural to come to a place of stillness. And as we get there, sometimes even before we get there, insights arise in the mind. As John Fung used to say, “Don’t memorize your insights. If they’re really worthwhile,” he said, “they’ll stick with you.” The important issue is, do they apply to what’s going on in your mind right now? If not, just put them aside. If they do apply, use them and then put them aside. In other words, you don’t have to go around with a ready-made bag of little insight gems that you carry around with you and bring out every now and then. You’re trying to create the quality of mind that will give rise to insight when it’s needed at all times. This is why there’s so much emphasis on meditating, not only when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, but trying to keep this same sense of inner center, this inner balance, this inner steadiness, going throughout the day. Because when the mind is still like that, then you see things that you wouldn’t see otherwise. And that’s what enables insight to arise. It’s like the old story about the goose and the golden egg. We just want to collect the golden eggs as we carry them around. There’s no time for the goose. So the goose dies. And then it turns out the eggs don’t last very long. They’re not really gold. They’re gold for a little while, and then they turn into something else. What you want is the goose that keeps on laying the golden eggs right when you need them. And that’s why the practice of concentration has to be consistent, has to be constant, gaining this center for the mind, and just dealing with whatever issues come up that pull you away, the part of you that says, “That’s too difficult. That’s too hard. That’s too much of an effort.” There’s so much of modern American Dharma that places an emphasis on being effortless, having a fluid life, a fluent life that can move from this to the next, and that’s all very easy. It’s all very natural and relaxed. And yes, you do want to have a state of mind that is relaxed, but there is work involved in keeping that state steady. And just the simple relaxation is enough. You have to be looking, curious, asking questions at the right time. All of which requires effort. After all, the Buddhist teachings on karma emphasize intention. It’s our intentions that shape everything. And when we’re practicing concentration, we’re taking an intention and trying to make it as steady as possible. See the power of our intentions, how they can shape our lives, how they can really make a difference, so that you don’t have to be subject to the flow all the time. Because where is the flow going to take you? It can take you all kinds of places. If you look at your mind right now, there are lots of different currents. Some are pulling you towards the Dharma, some are pulling you away. And you’ve got to make up your mind. Where are you really going to go with your life? Those currents that pull you away, exactly what do they have in mind? Where do they end up? Usually off in the shallows someplace. And they’re not pleasant shallows, either. It’s like the shallows in Lake Powell, where all the oil and gasoline and all the garbage in the lake tends to collect, up in those little side canyons. You ask yourself, “Is that where you want to go?” If you don’t want to go that way, you’ve got to make up your mind that even though those currents are there, and sometimes they’re strong, you’re not going to go along with them. And this is where the power of intention comes in. These images that we get thrown around, going with the flow, trusting interdependence, interconnectedness, that’s another big one. Because it’s not that when you’re interconnected you’re only connected to good things. You’re connected to everything that’s around in the world, the good and the bad, leaving you open on all sides. When you think about it, when you’re born with this human body, it’s like you’ve got this big, gaping wound that you’ve got to care for. This is why we have the reflections on the requisites every night. It’s not that the body can just sit here and be perfectly happy day after day after day without needing anything. It needs food, it needs clothing, it needs shelter, it needs medicine. You can’t sit in one position for many days and you’ve got to get it up, you’ve got to walk it around, lay it down. There’s a lot of work involved in this body, and because the body is so needy, that’s why we’re so dependent on other people, other things. This is the nature of our interconnectedness. We need the feed, we need the nourishment, and that’s why we lack freedom. So it’s not necessarily a good thing, this interconnectedness. People tell us that we want to have a life where we can dance the dance of interconnectedness and go with the flow. It all sounds very nice and easy, but it just doesn’t work out. You end up in those shallows, in the side canyons, where the old oil drums and the oil slicks, and who knows what kind of garbage and dead animals are lying in the shallows. So you’ve got to make the best effort to stay with the main current, the current that flows in the other direction, flows to the dominant, flows to the deathless. That’s the current you want to get into. And it takes effort. But the effort pays off. It’s like this ability to keep the mind fresh and concentrated. That way you get fresh insights instead of having to carry around old, stale insights. When the mind still just sees what’s going on, it sees what the problem is, or it has the potential to see what the problem is, if it’s not only still but also asking the right questions, then some of the effort pays off. Sometimes the issue is just that. Be extra still. Stay very still. Just watch what’s going on. Other times you realize that just sitting there is not enough. You’ve got to do something. You’ve got to maybe let this go, let that go. Where is there still some disturbance in the mind? When the mind is really still, and it’s been still for a long time, you can begin to see these things that you wouldn’t see otherwise. Sometimes it’s a question of just sitting there and watching, and other times it’s making decisions. In ways, it will bring the mind to even greater stillness, greater stability. But it’s in the doing, in the maintaining the stillness, in it asking the questions. That’s what makes the difference. So instead of lugging old insights around, as you do these things, you get the mind in the proper state. Its nature is to see things. It is to see things and solve problems, once you’ve got it in the proper place. It’s only that way that you can gain insights that you didn’t expect. And it’s the unexpected insights that really do make a difference. Otherwise, it’s the same stuff just rehashed over and over and over again. Sometimes it’s useful, and sometimes it’s not. We tend to say, “Well, that’s just the way it is with the world.” But it doesn’t have to be that way. The mind gets more sensitive, more in tune to what’s going on in the present moment and what the real issues are in terms of stress and suffering and the end of stress and suffering. You begin to see a lot of things that you wouldn’t see otherwise. It’s because of the doing. It’s because you have the intention that you really do want to put an end to this suffering once and for all. What’s recorded in Ajahn Mun’s last sermon, he says, “The one thing you’ve got to maintain at all times is your determination never to come back and suffer in this world again.” Once you’ve got that kind of fighting determination, all the other qualities in the path come together to maintain that determination. But that’s the crucial element. It’s based on insight, understanding the nature of suffering. It’s based on compassion, realizing that you don’t want to have that suffering continue. So use the practices of concentration. Use the questions that will develop insight and the ways that maintain that determination, make it strong, and see it through to its end. That’s the kind of life you lead when you practice in the Dharma. When you realize you’ve got that opportunity, there is that, that way of life is available. It is an option. You begin to wonder why you’d want any other way of life at all. you

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