What Are You Doing Right Now

April, 2002

There’s a question that the Buddha has us ask ourselves every day. Days and nights are flying past, flying past. What are you doing right now? Because what we’re doing right now is very important. It shapes both the present moment and has an influence on the future. If we’re careless or inattentive in what we’re doing, we’re going to shape a very sloppy present and shape a very sloppy future. This is basically what the immediate import of the Buddhist teachings on karma comes down to. We tend to think of karma as one of those exotic teachings that somehow got tacked onto Buddhism because it came into India. It may not be all that relevant to what the Buddha taught, but that’s not the case. He used the word “karma” for action, just like other belief systems in his time used the word “karma” for action. But they had very different beliefs about it, very different understandings of what the power of action was. In some beliefs, it was all totally determined. Everything was all set to go. Once the universe started going, it was kind of like a clock. You set the clock to go, and then everything has to follow in certain mechanical laws. Well, that’s not the Buddhist understanding. The Buddhist understanding is that your experience of the present moment is shaped by two things, two sorts of things—things you’ve done in the past, things you’re doing right now. You have free choice in the present moment, if you only take advantage of that freedom. Absolute freedom doesn’t come until you hit nirvana, but in the meantime, there are grades of freedom. Some days, when you’re alert and observant, you really see what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing, whether they’re skillful or not, and you make adjustments to make them more skillful if they’re not skillful enough for you. There are also times, of course, when you’re not observant, when you’re not alert, you seem to be on automatic pilot. The mind is making choices, but it’s all very obscured or very blurred, because you’re not giving it your full attention. You’re all concerned with other things. So when the Buddha is talking about karma, his main emphasis is on the present moment. There are times when he talks about past lives, future lives, but he always ends his discussion by saying, “This whole panorama of time is shaped by karma, and where is karma made? It’s made right in the present moment. It’s the choices we make, the intentions we have right here and right now.” So it’s this understanding of action that underlies what we’re doing here. In other words, when we’re meditating, we’re not just sitting here, leaving our minds open, hoping that something else will come in from outside. We’re here to watch what we’re doing right now. For example, right now, stay focused on the breath. To do that requires two qualities, mindfulness and alertness. Mindfulness is what keeps you reminding you, “Okay, stay with the breath. Stay with the breath.” Alertness is what actually watches the breath and, at the same time, watches over the mind to make sure that it stays with its intention, doesn’t switch off to some other intention. So we have to develop these qualities as much as we can. Try to catch yourself any time the mind is ready to slip off. Try to catch it. See if you can catch it before it slips off, because sometimes the mind gives warning signals that it’s getting bored with the breath or it’s wanting to stir off to something else. It’s a sign that the breath isn’t comfortable enough, the mind isn’t focused enough. So make the breath more comfortable and try to make yourself as sensitive as possible to the breathing process. Ask yourself, when you breathe in, exactly how far do you feel it in the body? Do you just feel the passage of air in and out the nose, or are there other sensations in the body that go along with the breathing, that are part and parcel of the breathing? The rise and fall of the ribcage, the rise and fall of the abdomen, other patterns of tension or tightness that appear as you breathe in, patterns that you hold on to as you breathe out. Can you breathe in without creating those patterns of tension? Can you breathe out allowing those patterns of tension to dissolve away? Ask questions about the present moment. That’s what keeps it interesting. It helps keep your attention riveted right here. If you have trouble maintaining mindfulness and alertness, maybe you should reflect on the way you live your daily life, because the same mind that’s meditating right now is the same mind that’s making decisions out in your daily life. That’s one of the reasons why the Buddha says the precepts are so important for the practice of meditation. In other words, you voluntarily take on vows to yourself that you’re going to avoid certain harmful actions, no matter what—killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants. Once you’ve made a vow like that, then you have to maintain it. It requires mindfulness and alertness, the mindfulness to keep your decision in mind, and alertness to watch over your actions to make sure that what you do doesn’t suddenly overstep the bounds that you set for yourself. As my teacher once said, “If you can’t keep watch over your mouth, how are you going to keep watch over your mind?” You start out with obvious things like the actions of your body, your speech. Set some voluntary limits for yourself. The limits are not there to be confining, but they’re there to keep yourself from straying over into things that are unskillful. You develop not only mindfulness, and alertness, but also the discernment that you need. Once you’ve set up these limits for yourself, many times you find yourself really tempted to overstep them, or you find yourself in situations where it’s hard not to overstep them. So you learn how to use your ingenuity to maintain your vow, and at the same time not suffer any unnecessary inconveniences. For example, you’ve made a vow not to lie. Someone asks you a question, and the answer for that question is something you don’t particularly want to tell them. So you’ve got to find some way around it, ways of avoiding the question, ways of answering it in a vague way, which is not a lie. It requires an element of ingenuity, so that you don’t just go for the easy way of just telling a little white lie, which then turns into a bigger lie, and a bigger lie, and that’s something you’ve got to cover up for. It just creates all kinds of inconveniences for yourself, and that element of dishonesty that you don’t want as a meditator. It’s interesting in the Jataka tales, which are supposed to be stories of the Buddha’s previous lives, that there are certain lifetimes where the Buddha does not behave all that honorably. He breaks this precept. He breaks that precept. There’s one where he kills a dog. He kills a potential criminal. There’s another time when he steals something. But there’s one precept he never breaks, and that’s the precept against lying. He himself said that the first requisite for anyone who wants to practice the Dhamma is truthfulness. He said, “Bring me a person who is no deceiver, and I’ll teach that person the Dhamma.” He said, “Of all the precepts, this is the one. If you can overstep this precept without feeling any embarrassment or without feeling pangs of conscience, then there’s no evil you can’t do.” So this is the one that’s really the strictest of the precepts. It’s the one against lying. It’s the most important. The reason we have so much trouble being mindful and alert is because we have this tendency to be dishonest with ourselves. We put up these little walls inside the mind. The precept on truthfulness helps. It reminds us that honesty is really necessary for us to know the truth. If you’re not honest with yourself, if you’re not true to yourself, then there’s no way you’re going to know the truth. You have to be a true person if you want to know the truth. So when you’ve developed that habit through taking the precepts, undertaking the precepts voluntarily, then those habits come in and they can’t help but have an effect on your meditation. On the one hand, you look at your actions and there are no wounds in your mind, things that you’ve done that were hurtful and that you wanted to hide from yourself. Those kinds of unskillful choices are either like open wounds or else they get this massive scar tissue that covers them up. In other words, we start denying that we did anything wrong. We start lying to ourselves that way. So if you do unskillful things in the course of the day, it can’t help but have an effect on your meditation. However, if you look over the actions of the day, there’s nothing unskillful you’ve done. You haven’t lied to anybody. You haven’t harmed anybody. You haven’t harmed yourself. It’s a lot easier for the mind to be open and honest with itself. There’s nothing it has to hide, nothing it has to cover up. So it’s in these ways that the way you live your life from day to day is an important context for the way your meditation is going to go. Because you develop certain habits through day-to-day life, and then when you sit down and meditate, if they’re the habits that are helpful for meditation, it’s just one continuous practice. If you’ve been going off in other directions, then there’s a struggle inside. So this question of days and nights fly past, fly past, what are you doing right now? It’s relevant both why you’re meditating and when you’re not meditating, because it’s all the same mind. It’s like someone who goes down to a gym to exercise. It’s not that they’re strong only when they’re in the gym. When they leave the gym, they’ve got that strength. They use it for other things. And if they lead a healthy life when they’re outside of the gym, when that comes in, okay, then they’re stronger when they’re in the gym. The processes help each other along, because it’s the same body. It’s the same with the mind. While you’re meditating, you want to develop mindfulness and alertness in your daily life. You want to be mindful and alert. The precepts give you good exercise in that way. So when the time comes to sit down and meditate, there you are. You’ve got these qualities already strengthened. The meditation gives you a chance to make them even stronger. It all comes down to this understanding that it’s really important what you’re doing right now, the choices that you make, the intentions that you follow through with. The more alert, the more sensitive, the more observant you can be to those actions, the more care you can take in being skillful in what you do, say, and think. This is what’s going to make the difference in your life. It’s from these factors that change comes. It’s from these factors that awakening comes, these things that we tend to overlook but are so important. There’s a lot about the Buddhist teachings that may seem exotic or strange, but in this particular issue, the whole issue of human action, it’s very down-to-earth, very immediate, because we’re making choices all the time. We’re choosing to act on this intention or that intention all the time. We’re constantly creating our lives right here, right now. And the training we have, the practice we have, is so we can learn to be more skillful in those choices that we make.

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