Road to the South Rim, The

November, 2002

Jon Lee once said that to practice is to get to know your own defilements. We don’t like to hear that. We like to hear that when you practice you get to know peace, calm, tranquility, insight. We don’t get to the peace, the calm, tranquility, and insight until you’ve gone past your defilements. It’s good to keep that in mind, otherwise you get discouraged. You sit here wanting peace, peace, peace, but you find turmoil. You want concentration, but you find distraction. You begin to wonder if you’re ever going to get there, if it’s going to work. Either you start doubting yourself or you start doubting the path. But we can’t get to the goals that we want until we go through the mess that’s in our minds. We can’t just drop the mess and move on. You’ve got to work through it. You sit down, you look at your mind, and you find all kinds of conflicting notions, conflicting desires. To get beyond those desires, you can’t simply drop desires. You have to sort things out. Try to give strength. Try to give prominence. Try to give priority to the desires for peace, the desires for release, freedom. To do that requires shifting the balance of power in your mind. There’s a certain amount of mental politics that goes on when you’re practicing. You find different desires clambering for attention, different thoughts pulling you this way, different thoughts pulling you that way. Actually, the thoughts don’t pull, but a thought appears, and you latch onto it, ride it off to where it’s going to go. This is what you have to watch out for. You have to train yourself bit by bit by bit to change the balance of power so that when a thought appears, you don’t get involved. The thought itself is pretty innocent. These thought constructs appear in the mind as a result of past karma. The problem is that we tend to latch onto them and elaborate them further, embroider them further. That’s our own new karma, our own new intentions, activities, and decisions on top of them. That’s what takes us off. We have to learn to catch ourselves in the act. When you sit here and meditate and try to focus on the breath and suddenly discover yourself off someplace else, don’t get discouraged. Just simply come back to the breath. A little while later, you’ll find yourself off again. Come back again. The progress in the meditation comes in catching yourself more quickly. You’re being more efficient in returning. Bit by bit by bit, you find that you get more skillful, more alert. You learn to detect the signs that the mind is ready to move and find ways of adjusting the breath, of strengthening your mindfulness so that you don’t go off with your distractions. You don’t follow those thoughts off elsewhere. What you’re doing is you’re strengthening the desire to become concentrated, giving it more and more prominence, giving it more and more priority in your mind. I guess what we experience comes from our desires. There’s one passage where the Buddha says that all things are rooted in desire, and this is what he meant, because it’s our desires that make our choices. It’s through our choices that we experience pleasure and pain, both in the present moment and on into the future. If our minds are full of conflicting desires, you can expect that your life is going to be full of a lot of conflict. The chaos in your mind is reflected in the chaos that you experience. It’s when you can start giving some order to your desires, giving prominence to your desires, giving priority to the desire for concentration, for mindfulness, for alertness, for discernment, for release. These are the things that will put you on the path to release. It’s chastening to realize that what we experience is basically what we’ve desired at some point, either in the past or in the present. A lot of times those desires are ignorant, which is why the things we experience are not what we thought we would get. We thought we would want to have a situation like this, we’d want to have a situation like that. When we actually get it, though, many times it’s not what we thought it would be. So you have to turn around and look at your desires. Which of the desires, the kind of desires that would lead in that direction, are they still there in your mind? If so, you’ve got to learn how to weaken them, how to strengthen the desire for true happiness, for true freedom. Again, we don’t like to hear this. We’d like to just put our desires aside, be done with them, and go straight to awakening but it’s only through sorting out our desires that we’ll get to where we want to go. John Munn once said that the most important thing, the thing you have to maintain at all times, is that desire for freedom, the desire not to come back and suffer, to make it a determination. In other words, a desire that has priority over your other desires. That’s what gets you on the path. It’s a little paradoxical that we use desire to get to a goal that’s without desire. What else would you use? You can’t use nirvana to get to nirvana. It’s not like the elements in the path. In the path, you want to be calm, well, you try to develop calmness. You want equanimity, you develop equanimity. But you can’t develop nirvana. Nirvana is something that lies totally outside of cause and effect. So you use the cause and effect patterns in your mind to get you to that point. What else would you use? Remember that the path and the goal are two separate things, and there are many aspects of the path that don’t resemble the goal at all. It’s like the road to the Grand Canyon. Have you ever driven to the Grand Canyon, either from the south or from the north? You realize you go through a lot of countryside that bears very little resemblance to the Grand Canyon. You come in from the north, there’s a forest, meadows, and then all of a sudden everything opens up. You come from the south, and the land is pretty flat and dry, a lot of scrubby pines, nothing very inspiring. But it gets you to the Grand Canyon, too. So whether you’re coming from the north or the south, that’s not something you have any control over right now. You have to start from where you are. Lots of us would like to come in from the north. We’d like to have what they call the most beautiful parkway. We’d like to have a parkway right in America, right up to the Grand Canyon. But sometimes we find ourselves coming from the south, where things are scrubby and dry. But still, you follow the road, and it takes you to where you want to go. So even though we want to encounter nothing but peace and calm and tranquility and insight on our path, you find yourself dealing with a lot of lack of peace, lack of insight, lack of mindfulness. You have to develop your ingenuity. You have to strengthen your will, strengthen your determination. That’s when you determine that you can get out of the difficulties you find yourself in. People who are lost in the woods, if they’re convinced that there’s no way out, are not going to be the ones who are going to find the way out. It’s the people who are convinced that there’s a way out, no matter how difficult it’s going to be, you’re going to find it. That’s the attitude that’s going to get you out of the woods. So even though there are times in the practice when things look bleak, when you sit here and meditate, all you can see is confusion in the mind. However, that’s part of the path. Not the confusion, but learning how to work through it. Think of the confusion as the raw materials you have to deal with. The path is a set of tools that you’re working on. No matter what the confusion, no matter what the distraction, no matter what the frustration, there are tools for dealing with those mind states. And even when you have difficulty working your way out of them, while you’ve learned something, that particular tool doesn’t work for this particular problem. That’s a kind of knowledge. That’s a kind of understanding. For there’s no one tool that’s going to take you all the way. No one technique. Greed, anger, and delusion come with the mind from different directions, with different strategies and subterfuges of their own. You have to have a whole set of strategies that you work with, too. So it’s learning how to figure out which approach works with which particular problem. That’s a lot of the insight right there. So as you sit here and meditate, you should remember that it’s always a learning experience. No matter how discouraging it may seem, no matter how many obstacles you run into, they all offer an opportunity to learn. It’s all part of the path. Of course, it’s not the case that the path is always going to be a desolate path. Even if you’re coming at the Grand Canyon from the south, there are still some really beautiful views of the road. But it’s the determination to stick with the road, no matter what happens. That’s what’s going to get you there.

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