One Step at a Time

December, 2002

When the practice seems difficult, I always remind myself of the time when I was in Thailand during the rainy season, and I’d have to go for an hour and a half on this round, through mud and wind and rain. I knew that if I didn’t go, there wouldn’t be anything to eat. And if I did go, I’d get all wet. And there’s really no choice. That present moment was not a wonderful moment. But I noticed that the thoughts that were swirling around in my head were even more violent and stronger than the winds that were swirling around. And I figured, if things are difficult, at least I shouldn’t add to the difficulty. And I found the best way to go through that experience, which is to focus on one step at a time. Not to think about how much longer it was going to be before I could get back to the monastery. Not to think about how cold I was or how drenched I was. Just one step at a time. And it made the alms round a lot more bearable. And so when things get tough, it’s important to remind yourself to focus on one step at a time. John Lee has laid out the steps of the meditation very clearly. One at a time, just focus on the breath coming in and going out. If you need a meditation word, use bhutto. When the breath becomes clearer, then just focus on the sensation of the breath as much as you can. And it may not be a great sensation, but at least you can find some relatively pleasant sensations. That’s all that’s asked of you. And then the next step is to go through the body step by step by step, noticing how the process of breathing feels in each step of the body. You don’t have to worry about how long it’s going to take for the mind to settle down. You don’t have to worry about how long it’s going to take for you to go through the whole body or how long it’ll take to get on to the next step. Just keep focusing on one step at a time. You notice that any large project requires that you approach it that way. Break the large jobs down into little jobs, manageable steps. And focus entirely on the little step that you’ve got to take right now. In the back of your mind, you’re going to have a sense of how the little step fits into the larger picture. But the focus should be just on this spot, what you can manage. Because oftentimes the things that are unbearable in life, things that are really frustrating, are that way because we’re taking on too much all at once. It’s the same when there’s pain. We’ve been feeling pain for several days, and we have no idea how much longer it’s going to last. We carry that whole stretch of time oftentimes in just one moment, even though we’re just experiencing one moment of pain right now. It’s as if we have to bear the whole weight of the pain we’ve felt so far and the whole weight of the pain that we’re going to be feeling ahead of us. It’s just too much for us to bear in any one moment. But if you take the pain one moment at a time, right now, right now, right now, drop the past, drop the past. Don’t think about the future. You find that your willingness to pare things down to small units, and to satisfy yourself with just a small unit, means that you can handle the job. The job doesn’t become overwhelming. And if you take it step by step by step, you can accomplish a lot. So as we meditate, we’re taught not to think in great big terms, but in little tiny step-by-step terms. Not only does it make it more manageable, but it’s easier to be true to your steps if you focus directly on what you’re doing right now. The mind starts getting carried away in larger thoughts, larger abstractions, larger principles that pull you away from the present moment. Thoughts about who you are, what kind of person you are. Those are all abstractions, and we tend to think that abstractions make issues cleaner and neater. But actually, they have lots of little nooks and crannies where the opportunity for self-deception can come in. These pictures we create for ourselves oftentimes have very little to do with reality, and they hide the step-by-step nature of reality. So try to keep things very clear. What are you doing right now? What are you doing right now? What are you thinking about right now? If you find yourself pulling away from the present moment, you can just drop that thought. You have to be resolute with yourself in this way. This is what right effort means. This is where the stringent standards of right effort come in. Not that you’re trying to do an awful lot in one particular moment, but you have to pare away everything that’s not relevant for right now. This particular one little moment you’ve got right here. When the mind starts asking questions, “How are you going to stand this next hour?” Don’t ask, don’t ask, don’t ask. Just because the mind can ask questions doesn’t mean that they deserve to be answered. Just because it has a thought doesn’t mean that the thought deserves to be followed through. The only thing you’re asked right now is to breathe and to be with your breathing. Keep it simple. It may not be easy, but learn how to keep it simple, step by step by step. The past doesn’t have to enter in right now. The future doesn’t have to enter in right now. You’ve just got the present moment right here. That’s all that matters, because everything you’re ever going to look for in the practice will be revealed right here. That whole nexus the Buddha talks about, how causality happens over time and also how it happens in the present moment. You’re going to see it right here. You can’t see it anywhere else. And when you see it, it’s going to be because you see it in the little things. So satisfy yourself with the little things right here, right now. John Lee once said that the Buddha wasn’t able to become the great person that he was, aside from making himself very small, very unimportant. He was just a person sitting out in the woods, breathing, watching his breath, watching for where there was any unnecessary suffering that he was adding right there and just cutting it away, cutting it away, cutting it away. And that worried him about how much more he was going to have to cut away in the future, and the fact that you’re able to cut away each little bit right now, right now, that’s good. That’s an accomplishment right there. That’s all he was, just a person sitting out in the forest, looking for something that everybody else said was impossible, and having nothing but his resolute honesty to fall back on. And how can you be honest? By being very careful and very attentive to the little things right here, right now. Other people can deal with the bigger issues. We have to learn how to contend ourselves with cutting things down to small issues, small issues, the ones that are relevant right here, right now. Trusting that if we are very careful about these smaller issues, the bigger issues will take care of themselves. you

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