Paving the World

February, 2003

When you wear rubber sandals, as far as your foot knows, the whole world is covered with rubber. Everywhere it steps is rubber. The same principle holds with your mind. The qualities you have in your mind cover your entire experience. If they’re good qualities, the world seems like a good place. If they’re unskillful qualities, the world seems like a turmoil. This is why we have to focus our practice on the mind. Once the issues in the mind are cleared up, then other issues in the world follow suit. So we have to focus your attention right here. What kind of qualities do you bring to the meditation? If you look at your mind in all fairness, you’ll see that they’re the same qualities that you bring to everything else in life. If you bring impatience to life, you bring impatience to your meditation. If you bring laziness to your life, you bring laziness to your meditation. If you bring laziness to your meditation, you bring laziness to your meditation, because it’s the same mind. This is why the practice of training the mind is not just a question of sitting here with your eyes closed. It has to cover everything you do, your attitudes towards everything you do. This is why there’s training in virtue, training in generosity, training in humility, training in renunciation. All these things train the mind in the qualities that it’s going to need to do the meditation properly. Generosity trains you to see that you can have happiness letting go of things. Because as little children we tend to think happiness comes in getting, getting, getting. We have to be trained to see that, no, there’s a deeper happiness that comes with letting go wisely, skillfully. The same with training in virtue. It teaches us all kinds of good qualities. Training in mindfulness, keeping your principles in mind. Alertness, watching your actions as you go through the course of the day to make sure they don’t go against your principles. And the quality of renunciation, the things that you would like to do, like to say, that would go against your principles, you let them go. And you don’t get worked up over the fact that you’re letting them go because you begin to see that your life grows lighter and lighter as you stop doing those things. Go down that whole list of what I call the ten perfections. Persistence, determination, endurance, patience, equanimity, goodwill, discernment. These are qualities that we have to develop in life and in the meditation, because they’re qualities of mind. They’re called pāramīs in the sense that you have to give them priority in your life. Because when you look at your life, what are you going to get out of it? You know that this body you’ve got here is going to start wearing down, this part will wear down, this part will start functioning in a way that’s not quite right. Bit by bit, the whole thing turns on you. So you can’t get much sense of real accomplishment focusing on the body. As for the world outside, as we can see very clearly, it depends on so many factors, so many people. Even the weather can change in such a way that it wipes out all kinds of things that you try to build, try to build up. And if you pin your hopes on outside things, accomplishing this outside, accomplishing that outside, many times you’re setting yourself up for disappointment. So that’s why these perfections, I call them, pāramīs, are the things that you should give top priority to in your life. Those are the things that are under your control. And they’re qualities of mind that don’t have to deteriorate along with the body. They’re things you can keep on building and building and building. And those are the things that you take with you when you go, the qualities you build into the mind. So it’s important they have top priority. And it’s important that you see your whole life as a practice in building these qualities in the mind. Otherwise, the practice gets lopsided. You get really good at one or two things, and other qualities in the mind start falling away. It’s like a person who exercises only one part of the body. He gets out of balance. Things get distorted in the mind. It gets kind of schizoid. The mind is one way when it meditates and another way when it’s out in the real world. And that’s not healthy. You want to make the mind a seamless whole, so that the qualities you develop day to day to day are the same ones you’re developing in your meditation. They help each other along. So that wherever you go, the whole world is covered with patience. The whole world is covered with determination. The whole world is covered with endurance. In other words, the qualities you have in your mind are steady wherever you go. And they’re good qualities, qualities you can depend on. This is when the training for the monks is. There’s so much attention to detail. This quality of meticulousness, that’s important. You don’t overlook the little details. You’re not in a rush to get to the big things. Because what are the big things made out of? They’re made out of the little details. This is an especially important principle in the meditation. If you’re in too big a rush, you want to get to those great states of concentration that you have known in the past, what you’ve heard about other people having. And you overlook the details. You try to unpack those little details and you find that there’s a lot of good lessons right there. So you focus on small things, like we’re doing right now. You focus on the breath. That’s about as small as you can get. It’s a very subtle sensation, just coming in, going out, flowing through the body. And it’s so easy to overlook or to push back into the back burner. It’s such a tiny detail. It’s in the full range of your awareness. But if you give it prominence, if you give it priority, you begin to find that it can do an awful lot for you. Because, again, it’s a quality you take with you everywhere you go. As long as you’ve got a body, you’re going to be experiencing the body through the breath. So try to get used to experiencing the body on this level. Whatever sensation is a bodily sensation, think of it as being filtered through the breath. The breath is the medium that these sensations get to you. So see them in the light of the breath, how the breath flows around them, how the breath flows through them, how you create these sensations out of basic breath energy atoms that cluster here, cluster there. You turn them into solid things, turn them into liquid things, turn them into warmth. All the other properties of the body are made up out of breath sensations. So try to tune in to this level of awareness here. And then get very patient, because it’s in the level of awareness that requires a lot of skill and a lot of precision. And if you’re in a hurry for the bigger things, you miss the details that the bigger things are made up out of. So again, it’s a question of priorities. Give some priority to patience. Give some priority to seeing things as they actually are right here and now, in their basic, most elemental sense. That way, when the bigger states do arise, they’ve been carefully put together, precisely put together. They’re not slapdash. You know all the details. And bit by bit, the bigger picture emerges. But if you try to impose the bigger picture on things beforehand, where does that bigger picture come from? It comes from your ignorance. It comes from past memories, things you’ve heard, things you’ve experienced here and there. And you try to slap them on top of what you’ve got here. And as a result, you miss what’s actually going on. You miss the basic building blocks out of which a real awareness, a real knowledge of the present moment is going to be built. Because you keep pushing to the future, what you want, what you expect. And then you keep pushing back to the past, what you remember. And that pushing and pulling, that basic raw material of the present moment, gets pulled out of shape like taffy. So you have to be very patient, very patient. Very precise, watching what’s coming in and going out right now, what’s arising, what’s passing away right now. When you have that kind of patience, you have that kind of meticulousness, that’s what covers your experience of the present continuously, just like the rubber on your feet. Or, in this case, user qualities that allow you to see more clearly what’s going on, so eventually you can get past even the rubber. So try to pave your experience of the world with these good qualities, not only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, but all the time. So that they become second nature, whatever task you do. That way there develops a wholeness in the practice. Things come together in a way that’s just right. Not because you force them, not because you have preconceived notions about what they’re right or what their rightness should be. You’ve got to explore to see what the rightness of these things is here in the present moment. If you don’t explore, then the whole range of your present experience is covered with ignorance, a thick, thick layer you can’t see through. So try to strip away that ignorance through being meticulous, through watching the details, through being patient, enduring. Not pulling off to the future, not pulling back to the past, but staying balanced right here. In this way, everything the mind does will be balanced. Because where else are you doing things but right here, right now? Just keep it right here, right now, all the time.

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