Carrot & the Stick, The

July, 2003

To keep your mind on the path, you need to use both the carrot and the stick. Like getting a donkey. In the old days, you would put a carrot on the end of a very long pole and hold it in front of the donkey. And the donkey, seeing the carrot, would walk after it. And that way you get the donkey to take your cart wherever you wanted it to go. Sometimes, the carrot wouldn’t work on you, so you’d have to hit it with a stick. And you needed a combination of the two in order to keep the donkey moving. The mind is often like that. Sometimes you need a carrot, sometimes you need a stick. The stick here is reminding yourself what happens to you when you allow greed, anger, and delusion to take over the mind. Just look at the crazy things that people do. You can look at the newspapers. You can look at people you’ve known. People do really destructive things to themselves simply because they allow greed to get a toehold in their minds, and then it takes over. Or anger gets a toehold. Lust, fear, delusion. See danger and respect being heedful. Realizing that you can’t let your guard down, because sometimes it’s just a tiny little thought that comes into the mind, and you give it room. You feed it. You nourish it. You allow it to take root. And then as it takes root, it destroys things. It’s like the Bodhi trees in Thailand. The seeds of a Bodhi tree are very small. Birds eat the little berries and carry the seeds all over the place. Many times you’ll see walls where a Bodhi seed has gotten in and it’s taken over. It’s destroyed the wall. It’s what starts out as a very small thing and can sometimes have really destructive consequences. The canon is full of stories and illustrations. They talk about maintaining mindfulness of the body. They say it’s like having a bowl of oil on your head. The bowl has been filled to the brim, and you’re going to have to walk between a performance of a beauty queen on a stage, singing and dancing, and then the audience on the other side, really excited about her singing and dancing. You’ve got to walk between the two of them. And a man is going to walk behind you with a sword raised, ready to chop off your head as soon as you let drip even a drop of oil. You want to maintain that same kind of alertness as you stay with the body. The beauty queen here is standing for all the attractive things in the world, and then the reactions of the audience, standing for the mind’s reactions to whatever comes in by way of the senses, you can’t let yourself get involved in either. You have to walk a very narrow path between the two, a very mindful path, if you don’t want to get swept away, if you don’t want your head cut off. Another image they can have is of a monkey caught in a tar trap. The monkey sees a glob of tar, and it goes and sticks its finger in it. Its hand gets stuck. So it tries to use its other hand to pull away. Well, the other hand gets stuck. It tries to use its foot, first its right foot, then its left foot. Both feet get stuck. Then it gets so angry at it that it bends down and bites the tar. Of course, its mouth gets stuck. Then the hunter can come along. The image is pretty gruesome. You put the monkey on a skewer, and then you carry it off. This is what happens to people who let themselves get carried away by things that they like or dislike. You get so wrapped up in it that you end up doing and saying and thinking things that are really destructive. So keep those images in mind as a stick for the meditation. Realize that when you allow the mind to start thinking of thoughts, thoughts of sensual desire or anger about this person, anger about that person, greed for this thing, greed for that thing, remember that it’s like getting yourself stuck in a tar trap and then being skewered by a hunter, or like having your head cut off. Keep those images in mind as a way of reminding yourself to be heedful. Those are the stick. As for the carrot, when you work on the breath, work with the body like this. Try to find ways of really getting into every little pattern of tension, every little pattern of discomfort. You’re getting very, very sensitive to the breath so the breath can work through these things. Many times we carry around a whole armor of tension in the body that we’re not aware of because it’s constantly there. When you start probing and thinking of the breath coming in and out of different parts of the body, and thinking of ways of working through the tension, you find that you open things up inside. So it’s not simply a matter of maintaining a difficult balance in the present moment. By enlarging your sense of awareness in the present, that sort of enlarges your present moment. So it’s easier to maintain balance. Instead of walking on a tightrope, you’re walking on a very wide platform. You’re not maintaining your awareness here simply to avoid the dangers outside, but you find that it gets more and more enthralling to work with the breath. You can try various ways of working with your posture. Try sitting up straight and seeing where the patterns of tension are that prevent you from sitting up straight. Then gradually release them, one by one, starting at the spot where the spine meets the skull and then working down. Think of the breath coming in and going out without you having to push or pull it or anything. Just allow it to come in on its own. You find that many times that will change the whole balance of power, the whole balance of stresses and strains in the body. It’s a domino effect. You change the way you breathe in your neck, and all of a sudden you see it making a difference in your back. It makes a difference in the back. It makes a difference in your hips and your hips down to your legs, to your toes. Or sometimes you can consciously tense up a muscle and then relax it, tense it up and relax it, to see what the difference between the two is. Then try to breathe in and out. Breathe both in and out without allowing that particular muscle to tense up. There are lots of ways you can play with the sensation of the breath on the body. This is something that each person has to work out for him or herself. The way you breathe, the way you hold your body, is something very personal. It’s your experience of the body. It’s your pre-verbal experience of the body. You’re going to be working on a pre-verbal level as you work through it. You begin to see that there are many strange assumptions that you made about how things are put together, how things are held together in the body, what you have to do in order to breathe. Start taking apart that sense of, “Well, I’ve got to move this, and I’ve got to have this sensation, or I’ve got to have that sensation in order for it to count as a really good in-breath.” Try questioning that. Use other muscles than the ones you ordinarily use to breathe. See what that does. Think of the breath in different ways, what we call de-perception. Take apart your perceptions. Sometimes you don’t even know you have the perception. The way to deal with that is to just tell yourself, “You can breathe in and out through every pore. It’s possible.” Now, what would it be like? What would it feel like if you were actually breathing in and out through every pore? You notice that it changes the way you breathe. That means you’ve uncovered a perception or a particular mental picture that you didn’t realize was there by challenging it. There are lots of ways to get into the body in the present moment. As you find that the body gets more and more interesting, it helps keep you from running out after things outside, because you’ve got plenty to do in here, plenty to explore, plenty of questions to ask, things to experiment with, and a sense of well-being, a sense of better circulation in the body, better posture, a sense of well-being and ease, and sometimes even a rapture that spreads throughout the body. This means that you can stay in the present moment without thinking of it as walking on a tightrope. You’re walking on a platform. You’re solidly based. That doesn’t mean once the breath starts working this way, you’re not going to need the stick. Sometimes when things get really comfortable in the present moment, you start getting complacent. So you have to realize, “Well, you still haven’t gone all the way.” So you have to alternate between the carrot and the stick and learn. Part of the skill in being a meditator is learning when the mind needs the carrot and when the mind needs the stick. But always keep both of them ready. You may prefer the carrot to the stick, but you’ll find that you need both. That’s when you become your own teacher. Not simply siding with your likes and dislikes, but really being objective about what the mind needs. So that you keep it on the path, not go wandering off, enthralled with a beauty queen, or getting involved with the audience. Not sticking your hand into the tar trap, but staying right on the path that the Buddha said leads to the end of suffering. We’ve wandered off the path so much already. Let’s try seeing where the path will go, whether it lives up to the promises that the Buddha made for it. As the Jhammahabhuvan said, “See if you can prove the Buddha wrong.” You can’t prove him wrong just by desultory practice. You’ve really got to apply yourself. But it’s only by really applying yourself in this way that you can decide the truth of the Buddha’s teachings. In other words, you have got to be true if you want to know what else is true. Know if the end of suffering is true. That’s something that’s really worth knowing. Settling that issue for yourself once and for all.

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