Right Where You Are

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Dharma has us start right where we are. But for most of us, the problem is that we’re not there. We’re focused someplace else. We’re like a lens in a camera. It’s located inside the camera, but it’s not focused inside the camera. It’s focused way outside. So the first step in the practice is to get as close to inside as you can, to bring that focal point back in, right where you are. In fact, that’s not just the start of the practice. As we get further and further into the practice, you find yourself focusing in more and more precisely, closer and closer into where you are right in the present moment. And you find that where you are is in what you’re doing. This is so much of our sense of who we are, our sense of ease or disease in the present moment, comes from our sense of knowing or not knowing what to do in the present moment, either in dangerous situations or just plain old everyday situations where we’re at loose ends or when we’re bored. There’s a real sense of discomfort there, even more so when you’re feeling in a position of danger and you don’t know how to react. For some people, that’s too trivial an issue to deal with. I think that when you come to spiritual practice, you should deal with larger issues, bigger issues. How does life begin? Where is it going? That’s like taking your camera lens and focusing it way outside again. You’re lost in areas where you’re really not there, areas that you don’t have any direct experience of, and it all comes down to inference and deduction. The Buddha realized that that kind of emphasis really can lead you astray. He said, “If you really want to see what’s going on in life, what’s important in life, look at what you’re doing right now.” So the meditation brings us to that doing. What are we doing right now? The Buddha says there are actually three aspects to what we’re doing at any one particular time. There’s the physical doing, which, if nothing else is happening, at least you’re breathing. So that’s where we take the breath as our focal point. And then there’s speech, the things that we say. Regardless of the content of what we’re saying, there are two kinds of thinking that go into speaking. One is focusing your mind on a particular topic, and then the second one is coming up with a comment on the topic. It’s called directed thought and evaluation. So what you do is you take that directed thought and you bring it to the breath, and then you evaluate the breath. And then there’s mental fabrication, feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain, and then the labels we put on them. So you bring that into the equation when you’re focusing on the breath, when you’re directing the thought and evaluating. Notice the sense of the feelings that come along with the breathing. Try to keep all these things together, and you find that you’re getting closer and closer to where you are. Allow yourself to get absorbed in these processes, because it’s in the doing that we are in these processes. That’s where we’ll find what’s going on. That’s where we’ll find what the big issues in life are, why there is that sense of disease when you don’t know what to do. Or when you’re unsure about what you’re doing. Look into that. But to simplify matters, we say, “Okay, stay with the breath.” Know that that’s all you have to do right here, right now. And then direct your thought to the breathing and evaluate the breathing. How does it feel? What kind of feelings come along with the breath? That’s all you have to know. This is bringing your focal point inside. Because what you’ll find, ultimately, is that in all of these activities there’s an element of intention. And as we get more and more involved in these processes, you see that element more clearly. That’s what we’re trying to catch sight of, because that element of intention is what lies at the basis of all our experience of the present moment. But it takes lots, peeling through lots and lots of layers. It’s like an onion. There are many layers of experience here before we get to that point in the onion, way down deep in the onion. But know that everything is heading in this direction, more and more inward, more and more being right here, right where you are, right with what you’re doing. You have a strong sense of the importance of this practice. If you want to understand the Buddhist Dharma, you have to establish yourself at this point, because it’s from this point that all the other teachings make sense. You can read about them in books, and you can analyze them in the abstract. But they show their real value when you’re looking at the teachings from the point of view of a mind centered in the breath, a mind centered in the body, right here, right now, in and of itself. This in and of itself is difficult, just because being with the breath and the body, we have to come through many layers of associations that we have around our body. We may have the feeling that our body is something we like, something we don’t like. Other people like it, other people don’t like it. And when we run against those layers of association, many times they repel us. We bounce back out. To learn just to be with the body in and of itself, how do you experience the body right now? We’ve got the breath coming in and going out. You have your sense of the presence of the body, which, when you get to know it really carefully, you discover is an aspect of the breath element as well. There’s a breath energy flowing through the body that allows you to know that you’ve got, say, your right arm over on the right, the left arm over on the left, your legs here, your head there. The basic energy running through the nerves, running through the blood vessels, is what lets you know these things are there, and it’s associated with the breathing. One of the things you’ll be learning as you focus more and more on the breath, get more and more absorbed in the breathing, is exactly how these things are related. Immerse yourself in the sense of the body, just right here, right now, without any of the other associations, past or future, good or bad, just what you’ve got right here. You’ll find, of course, the mind keeps slipping off this frame of reference, going to other ones that you’re more familiar with. So be patient but firm with it. Just keep coming back. What is it like to have a body right here, right now? What is it like to be aware right here, right now? Just be with that direct perception. The more consistently you can stay with this immediate sense of being right here, right now, the more you’ll see is going on right here, right now. It’s not just a passive process where you’re watching. You’re actually involved in the shaping of the right here, right now. That’s what you’re going to be looking for. And you find that this shaping takes place on many, many levels. Again, it’s like that onion. You peel through one layer and you’ve got another one. You peel through that and you’ve got others. But the reward, as you go through the layers, is that the mind gets a greater and greater sense of stability. It really is at home in the present. You’ve created a sense of ease that goes along with being here. This sense of ease is important because many times the insights that come as you peel away the layers of the present moment have to do with ways you’ve been dishonest with yourself, ways you’ve decided to do things that you really know are not right but you believe you’ll go ahead and do them anyhow. In other words, things you don’t like to see in your own mind. Again, there’s a natural tendency to run away from those realizations. But if they come up in the context of a sense of well-being, a sense of ease, a sense of stability here in the present moment, they’re not threatening. In fact, you’re able to dissociate yourself from them. You say, “I don’t want to go there anymore, and I don’t have to.” Because you’ve got this sense of stability, the sense of being at home with yourself. Many times people have very little of that sense. You put them in the doctor’s office and you don’t give them a magazine. They just have to sit there for a while. You find they get very much ill at ease. It’s not for fear of what the doctor’s going to do. It’s simply that they’ve got all that empty time. It was one of the Buddha’s insights to realize that this is something that’s worth looking into. Why is it we don’t feel at home in the present moment? What’s the sense of suffering? What’s the sense of stress? Suffering may seem to be too strong a word, but there’s an element of dis-ease. He took that as his First Noble Truth. You don’t have to wait for intense pain. Just that simple sense of dis-ease in the present moment. Why should that be? You dig down into that. It’s best to dig down when you have a sense of stability, the mind well-focused in the present moment, the mind at home in the present moment, and see that even then there may be a sense of dis-ease. You want to dig into that so that you’re coming from a position of strength, so that you’re not going to be afraid or threatened by any of the insights that come up. What you’re doing is trying to approach the Dharma the way the Buddha approached it. In other words, starting from right here, right now, and then working out and working in. So instead of trying to understand the Dharma from the outside, it comes from this perspective of the inside, this focused perspective right here. Where you finally get the camera lens to focus on itself. So you begin to notice the subtle movements of the mind. This big hunk of experience that we have in the present moment begins to sort itself out. You can see which parts of the experience correspond to the different aggregates, which parts of the experience are form, which ones are the feelings of pleasure and pain. When you learn to separate those two out from each other, in other words, separate the breath from the feelings that arise from the breath, you begin to see how slippery feelings are. You try to pin them down with your perceptions. This is a feeling of pain. Whoops, it just changed into something else. Then it came back again. This must be a feeling of pleasure. Well, that can slip into something else, too. It’s like eels running around your body. You’ve posted post-it notes on this eel and that. Of course, the eel has gone by the time you posted it. Then there are the thought fabrications, the element of intention that underlies all of this experience, and the consciousness. These are actually separate things. When you get really, really still, you can see that they’re separate. Not that you have to go taking them apart from the outside. It’s allowing the mind to settle here in the present moment and watch very carefully. So you can begin to see movements here, movements there. The more still your mind is, the more constant it is, the easier it is to see inconstancy, impermanence, stress, and realizing that you wouldn’t want to identify with those things. This is where the three characteristics all come together. Someone once said that if you really understand inconstancy only when you see that it’s the same thing as stress, and that stress is the same thing as not-self, the three are not separate things. They’re all aspects of one thing. You see them that way when the mind is still, as you’re trying to settle down in the present moment. If you see something is inconstant and undependable, you don’t want to settle down there. Why? Because it would be unstable. That instability is what lies at the essence of stress. And if you’re not settling down there, if you’re not associating with it, well, there’s that sense of not-self. You begin to dissociate yourself from these things. You move into deeper and deeper levels of your onion, peeling away layer after layer, as you get closer and closer to this sense of pure awareness in the present moment. You’re trying to ferret out the intentions that still surround that, still buzz around it. And the really interesting insights come in when you actually see the intentions in the act, and you don’t associate with them. What usually happens, though, is you replace one intention with another one. The skill comes when you learn how not to get involved in any intention of any kind, even the intention to stop the intentions or the intention not to associate. That has to drop away as well. That’s subtle work. That’s the direction we’re heading. So what we’re doing as we practice is we’re starting where we are and then we dig deeper and deeper into where we are. And the Buddha’s insight was that when you dig in this way, the implications, the ramifications, spread throughout your whole experience of the cosmos. So what originally may seem like a trivial issue is, “Why is there a sense of dis-ease in the present moment?” When you really start taking it apart, you find that the ramifications spread in all directions. This is what’s so amazing about the Buddha’s teachings, that instead of trying to track things out to the beginning of time or the end of time or the beginning of the world or the end of the world, he turns around and just looks right here. What you’ve got right here takes that apart. So this is why we try to bring the mind to the present moment, why we try to keep here what all this activity and the practice is all about. Use thinking in order to get to a point that’s beyond thinking. Think about the breath. Evaluate the breath. In other words, make use of what you’ve got, but learn to turn it to a new use. Instead of keeping your focal point way outside, you use your thinking, you use your sensitivities in the present moment to bring things further in, further in, closer in, closer in. Because the really important issues lie right here. The world tells us the important things are someplace else. You have to study history to understand some things. You have to know about politics to understand other things. You have to watch the news. You have to read books. All of which are ways of getting your attention further and further away. More and more in areas of uncertainty. This is probably one of the curses of modern life, that we’re so much tuned in to what’s going on all over the world. That leaves us more and more uncertain all the time. Which news sources are you going to trust? When you have an action, exactly how far do its ramifications go? Can you ever really know? Because so many of these things are hidden when you buy something. Exactly who’s been involved in the process? Of making that thing? Many times it requires muckraking journalism to find out exactly where our clothing comes from. Something as simple as that, where our food comes from. The wood that went into this building, where does that come from? What were the working conditions like? All kinds of things that you just can’t know. From the point of view of the Dharma, that just leaves you in ignorance. No matter how much you trace things out in that direction, you just have more and more questions. The Buddha says, “Focus on things where you really can know.” You know the breath is coming in. You know the breath is going out. As you get more and more familiar with the mind, you get clearer and clearer about what your intentions are. You see the qualities of the mind that lie behind them, and you know better and better which kinds of intentions are skillful and which ones are unskillful. He says, “Focus right here, the whole issue of morality as it pertains to the practice, is focused on things that you can know, the quality of your intention, the quality of the motivations behind the intention. That’s something you can know, something you can control. And for the purpose of training the mind, that’s all you have to know, is that you can trust in the laws of human action, that if the quality of your intention is good, the results are going to be good. However, they work themselves out in the ramifications of the world around you.” He said, “If you try to trace the results of your actions, you go crazy. But if you stay with the source of your actions, stay with the intention and the perceptions that lie behind it, your focus is at the right place. For the sake of training the mind, for the sake of putting an end to suffering, the whole purpose of the Buddhist teachings was to take away the mystery of our experience by focusing our attention on what’s right before our eyes. What’s right? Or, to continue the analogy of the camera, what’s right in our eyes? What’s right in that lens? Focus the lens further and further until you’ve got the focal point inside. Then you’ll find that everything you need to know is right there.

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