Direction & Determination

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When we meditate, we have to have a sense of where we’re going with all this. This applies not only to the meditation, but to the practice as a whole. When we practice generosity, when we observe the precepts, we sit down, close our eyes, and focus on the breath. Where is this going to take us? Where do we want to go? A lot of this has to do with our motivation. Our determination. You think about the Buddha. When he left home, it wasn’t just to wander around the forest for fun. He had a very specific mission in mind. He wanted to see if in a world where there was aging, illness, and death, was there something that didn’t age, didn’t grow ill, didn’t die? He wasn’t going to come back home until he found it. Fortunately for us, he was able to stick to that standard. He didn’t give up halfway. He found out that it was something that could be attained. This is one of the great paradoxes of the Buddhist teachings, that he was looking for something that was unconditioned. What did he use? He used things that were conditioned. He used the elements of his body, he used the aggregates of body and mind, the properties of body and mind, all of which are things that take birth, grow old, grow ill, and die away. Yet he used those so that they could lead to the Deathless. It was his ability to look very carefully at everything that came along in the path. Was this what he was looking for? He first studied with a couple of teachers who taught to the dimension of nothingness, the dimension of neither perception or non-perception, and they said, “That was it. That’s as far as the mind can go.” Then he looked at where they were, and he said, “This is still not what I’m looking for.” It was that standard that he set for himself. That was what saw him through. So he didn’t settle for lesser things. But at the same time, he didn’t throw those lesser things away. He learned how to use them. When was the proper time to use them? When was the proper time to put them aside? This is why his basic teaching is teaching on skill fullness and lack of skillfulness. There’s that passage where one of his students is asked one time, “This teacher of yours, he doesn’t seem to come down on any of the common issues of the day. He’s a nihilist. He doesn’t teach anything.” And the student said, “No, that’s not the case. He does teach something very clearly, what’s skillful and what’s not skillful, with the ultimate standard of skillfulness being what leads eventually to the Deathless.” All of his teachings are based on convention, but they’re conventions with a purpose, just like even our thoughts about the Deathless. These are conventional thoughts. It’s impossible for us to encompass in our imagination what the Deathless is like. This is what the Buddha teaches about it only in analogies, images. So we don’t focus too carefully on the pictures, but we use the pictures, realizing that this is something really worth looking into, this possibility. Because you look all around us and where are we? The human realm is not an ideal realm. Matt Cronin calls it life in hell. When people call it heaven or they call it a Buddha land here, they’re obviously talking in deluded terms, because there’s so much suffering. It’s not simply that we’re looking at it in the wrong way. The suffering is real. If you deny the reality of suffering, you deny the whole point of the teaching. So here we’re working with the issue of suffering. The Buddha promises us an end to suffering. So this is something we want to look into. We use these things. We use our body. We use feelings, perceptions, thoughts, constructs, consciousness, and turn them into a path. Whatever comes up in the body and the mind, there’s a question, “Can this be used as part of the path or not?” Some things are beyond the pale, but other things can be used at the right time. This is what skill is all about, knowing when to use your feelings, when to put them aside, when to hold on to a particular mind state, and when to just watch it and let it go. Where does skill come from? It comes from being observant, testing things. Any learning situation involves testing to see what works, poking around. If our minds couldn’t do anything, if they were just totally observers without any action at all, we wouldn’t know anything about the world. It would all be passing colors and shows. Like the way the world appears to people who’ve been blind from birth, and suddenly their eyes are fixed so that eyes can actually see. Well, it turns out their brains can’t process all that information because they haven’t had the experience of working with those patches of color to turn them into a world. It’s because we’ve been working with these things ever since we were little that we have a sense of the world. We can move around in the world. We know about it. We know what works. We know what doesn’t work. As we’re training ourselves in meditation, the same process applies. We start poking around in the mind. These opinions that we’ve been holding so tightly for so long, to what extent are they helpful and to what extent are they not? The Buddha doesn’t have you throw opinions away entirely. After all, right view is part of the path. It’s simply a question of learning when to use a particular opinion, when it’s useful and when it’s not. He uses the concept of self, he uses the concept of happiness, relative happiness, when he’s teaching. But there are times when he puts those concepts aside. We can look at how he does this to get a sense of his sense of when these things are useful and when they’re not. But for us, it isn’t really knowledge until we experiment on our own to see what helps alleviate the suffering of the mind, to see what helps us see things more clearly. To understand cause and effect more clearly, because it’s through discernment that we attain awakening. Many times we forget this. We think that you can just stumble into awakening. There are actually teachers out there that say, “When you sit and meditate, you’re simply waiting for an accident to happen.” But that doesn’t fit in with the major factor of the path, discernment. Discernment sees cause and effect, and it sees it by experimenting, changing the causal circuit to see what effect that has, to see if it really is a cause, to see the extent to which its effects go. So meditation is an experiment. And because the goal to which we’re headed is a radical goal, the total end of suffering, we have to be ready for radical experiments, views and ideas that we’ve held to for a long, long time. We have to learn to put a question mark next to them to see when are these useful views and when are they not. We also have to be aware of the states of awareness that we’ve experienced in the past. To what extent are these parts of the path? To what extent are they not? These are states of awareness that we’re experiencing right now. To what extent are they on the path? To what extent are they not? You can get advice, you can read books, but ultimately the knowledge comes from what you’re doing right here, right now, to see what works and what doesn’t work, what opens up to the deathless and what doesn’t, or at least what heads in the right direction and what doesn’t. What keeps us going is that determination that we don’t want to come back to suffer. There’s that passage in the John Munn biography, in John Munn’s last talk, he talks about all the things you have to learn to give up, give up, give up in the practice. And then he ends on a note, “The one thing you hold on to, and that’s your determination not to come back and suffer ever again.” He says that’s the warrior. All the other parts of the practice, the concentration, the virtue. The other elements that go into the practice. These are the support core for the warrior. The warrior is the determination not to come back and suffer ever again. He says, “Hold on to that until you’ve reached the end of the path.” That’s one thing you never let go. But in the course of the path, it’s a matter of learning when there are times to pursue this in a very energetic way and when other times you simply have to be very observant or watch. It’s an element of balance, and the balance may change from time to time. Right effort. Sometimes we think of being a middling effort. Well, it’s not middling all the time. Sometimes it’s extreme. Sometimes it’s very subtle. Then again, the sense of how much you should push yourself and how much when there are times to relax, that comes from watching. Experiment. See what works and see what doesn’t work. But underlying all the time has to be that determination. This is the direction you want to go. When you keep that in mind, then whatever experience you come up with, you can have at least a handle on where you want to take it, what you want to do with it. So hold on to that sense of direction no matter what happens, for that’s the element that’s going to see you through.

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