Mundane Right View

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When the Buddha taught right view, he taught two levels, mundane and transcendent. Most of us, when we first hear about the Buddha’s teachings, learn the transcendent level of right view, which is the Four Noble Truths, about suffering and its cause, its cessation and the path to its cessation. We tend to skip over the mundane level of right view, but that forms the basis for understanding the transcendent. When you do any kind of practice, it’s good to make sure the foundation is solid, that you don’t go skipping over what seem to be the unattractive details. This is a natural human tendency. When we were back in Riang’s, in the John Fung’s monastery, we built a jetty, one of the aspired monuments, and a large Buddha image. In both cases, when we were working on the foundation, hardly anybody came to help. When we were pouring the foundation for the Buddha image, we had six or seven people, and that was it. By the time we came to finish the very top of it, we had scores and scores of people fighting over who was going to send the buckets of cement up to the top. But if you don’t have the people who do the foundation, the top never gets done. And it’s the same in the practice. You’re not clear about the foundations, and the more advanced stages get murky and can get distorted and can fall down. So let’s look at that foundation, because it forms the foundation for what we’re doing right here, right now. The basic principle of mundane review is the principle of karma, that actions do yield results and that those results are determined by the quality of the intention behind the action. Skillful intentions lead to pleasant results. Unskillful ones lead to unpleasant results. As John Fung once said, this is the principle you have to believe if you’re going to practice the meditation properly. In other words, we’re not sitting here waiting for some sort of spiritual accident to happen. We’re not waiting for some outside force to come in and enlighten us. It’s going to depend on our own actions, what we do, how we think, how we focus the mind, how we position our awareness. These are all very important things in the meditation. But when the Buddha starts with the principle of karma, he starts in two very interesting ways. One is the principle that there are things that are given. In other words, the act of giving is important. It has a special value. He also says that there are mother and father. In other words, that our parents have a special place in our lives, that we owe them a special debt of gratitude. So that’s how the Buddha introduces the principle of karma, through generosity and gratitude. And from that he builds. So those are the two qualities we want to start out with. Modern psychologists have discovered that relationships that are built on generosity and gratitude are much more likely to produce happiness than ones that are built on simple exchange or contracts. So you give me this and I’ll give you that. In other words, if you’re going to give something, you have to be sure you’re going to get something in return. They say that those kind of relationships don’t produce much happiness at all. When you think about it, that’s what our whole economy is based on. But in a place like where we are right now, it’s a different kind of economy. It’s based on generosity and gratitude. In other words, you give without charging a price. Of course, you know deep down inside that somehow there’s going to be a reward. Sometimes the giving is, in and of itself, a reward. But you’re not making your giving dependent on getting that reward in a particular way, at a particular time, just the way you want it. You trust the process. You trust that the giving is good for you, in and of itself. When you bring that attitude to the meditation, it helps an awful lot. Because a lot of times in the very beginning, there are a lot of hurdles you have to overcome. You sit there waiting, “Well, when am I going to finally see the results in this? Or I’ve been sitting for five minutes, where is the peace of mind?” That kind of attitude doesn’t go anywhere in the meditation. But if you’re used to giving, then when you come to sit down and meditate, you take that same attitude. You’re here to give your time. You’re here to give your attention. You’re here to give your powers of observation to this process. And you’re not going to be too quick to call in all your chips. You give it time. People who have time, those are the ones who are really wealthy. When I first went to stay in Riyang, it was a pretty hard place to stay in. The monastery was quite poor, and I’d never had so few possessions in my life. Everything I owned could be put in a bag. But I was struck by a different sense, a sense of wealth, in terms of the time I had to give to the practice. That’s why the life here at the monastery is designed the way it is. We may not have a lot in terms of material things, although here we are a lot better off than a lot of places. But the wealth here is in your time. You’ve got whole days to practice. Not only practicing meditation, but also practicing generosity, observing the precepts. So you take this wealth of time and you give it to the practice. Because you realize that the practice is good not only for you, but also for the people around you. It’s your gift to them. If you can chip away at some of the greed, anger, and delusion in your mind, the people around you are going to benefit a lot. And this practice is built up not only in generosity, but also in gratitude. If you were to open your eyes right now and look around, every material thing in here is the result of somebody else’s generosity. Or maybe some of it’s some of your generosity, but it’s all the result of people’s generosity. And it’s here so we can practice. The roof over our heads, the walls around us, those were built by people who gave their time, gave their money, to make it more comfortable for us to practice. The Buddha image up here, the altar, that’s to inspire us. Nobody dissolves. We find that altar. It’s been put together by this person’s act of generosity, that person’s act of generosity. Here you are sitting in the midst of generosity. You’re living off other people’s generosity. And the attitude you should have is one of gratitude. So you practice out of gratitude. This has all been done so that you can practice. This is one way of repaying that debt, is to actually do the practice. In the texts, they talk about the motivations for practicing, trying to get rid of the defilements in the mind. And one of the motivations that the Buddha praises is to practice out of gratitude, so that all the people who’ve helped support your practice will benefit from it. So you find that when you practice with this attitude of generosity, this attitude of gratitude, it helps the practice go over a lot of hurdles. It gives you the strength, it gives you the juice you need to keep going. This is why the mundane level of right view is important for reaching that transcendent level, because it takes a lot of juice to get the mind to a good state of concentration where you can really look at things in terms of the four noble truths. In other words, not worrying whether it’s me or not me, or whether things really exist out there or they don’t really exist. You just look at your experience in terms of where there’s suffering, what you’re doing to cause the suffering. Again, that’s principle of action and its result. In that case, unskillful action. And also what you can do to put an end to that suffering. Again, principle of action, skillful action, leading to a happy result. The end of suffering. But to get there, you have to work at the foundation. You can’t just lean a ladder against the air and climb up it and hope that it’s going to hold your weight. You need a good, solid foundation. This is where it begins. It begins in these good qualities of mind. Generosity and gratitude are happy-making qualities. You don’t have to wait until some faraway future event to get the rewards. Just having a mind that feels generous, having a mind that feels gratitude, that’s a spacious mind state. It’s a good mind state to be in, a good one to build on, a good source of energy. So make sure you don’t neglect the foundation, because everything else depends on that.

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