Dualistic Path, The

October 24, 2005

The Buddha once said that all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering. We could translate it “stress and the end of stress.” Those are two things right there. And it’s an important distinction to keep in mind. Everything else is based on that distinction. And you can say that it’s dualistic, but it’s dualistic with a purpose. There’s nothing inherently wrong with making this distinction. If you don’t see the distinction, if you don’t appreciate it, it’s really hard to follow the path. It underlies the motivation—the Buddha’s motivation to teach or a motivation to practice. There are other distinctions that he taught as well. Cause and effect. The things you do that can lead to stress, or the things that you do that can lead to the end of stress and suffering. The action and the result are two different things. They’re connected, but they’re different. This is why the essential quality that we need to develop is discernment, the ability to make those distinctions. But again, it’s not just idle discernment. It’s discernment motivated by the realization that suffering is a burden, something that we want to end. This is why we begin the meditation with that last chant on the four sublime attitudes. It starts with goodwill. Goodwill for ourselves means wishing for true happiness, in other words, the end of suffering. Goodwill for other people means wishing for their ability to end suffering as well. The problem is that we’re all suffering to some extent. We’re all experiencing stress to some extent. Many of us don’t realize exactly how much there is. People who have gained awakening come back and they say, “The whole world is on fire. Your eyes are on fire. Your ears are on fire. Excuse me, your eyes are on fire. Your ears are on fire. Your nose, tongue, body, mind.” Compare it to the total end of suffering that’s found in awakening. That was the Buddha’s vision of the world when he came out of the bliss of awakening, seeing how everything was on fire. Every living being was on fire. And for most of us, we don’t really notice it. We enjoy the flames. That’s one of the reasons why the Buddha taught meditation, to make you more and more sensitive to the areas where there is suffering, where there is stress that you didn’t notice before. So what we want to do is to sensitize ourselves both to the distinction of presence and absence of stress, and to this issue of cause and effect. So I teach you to meditate, to develop the sense of pleasure and ease that comes from concentration. That’s part of the path. As you’re working with the breath, allow the breath to be comfortable. Try to get more and more sensitive to how the way you breathe can lead to a sense of comfort or discomfort in the body. That, again, teaches you cause and effect, stress and lack of stress. The reason we don’t see these things clearly is because our mind is hopping around all the time. You stay with one thing consistently, you begin to see things you never saw before. So try to stay with the breath as continually as possible. Be sensitive to any bit of disease, tightness, tension, whatever, associated with the breath. Learn to iron it out, smooth it out. Watch for the mind’s tendency to jump away. Usually it’s avoiding boredom or a little bit of tension. Sometimes it’s the slightest things that can send the mind off. Learn how to resist that habit. Because when you resist it and you can stay here, you begin to see, “Oh, there was that little bit of disease that set the mind off.” And you hardly noticed it. But this time you notice it because you’re staying here. And the longer you stay here, the more you begin to see even more subtle things in the mind. Concentration can deepen. Your sensitivities get heightened. You get the breath as comfortable as it can be. You can only adjust it so much. And then you learn to settle down. Okay, no more adjusting, just staying one with the breath. But again, this sense of oneness serves a purpose for making distinctions. Because we have our old habits of how we tend to divide up the mind. Or divide things up in the mind, divide things up in the body. With concentration, we bring them all together and let them sit together for a while. As things get more and more still, the breath gets more and more subtle, finally the breath can stop. You stay with the stillness of the body, this sense of awareness filling the whole body, this still breath filling the whole body, out to every pore. And when you get there, you begin to see something. You see the movements of the mind. And now you’re seeing them as they actually happen, not in terms of your preconceived notions of how it’s done, but what’s actually happening. As the mind has a perception about things, what happens when it changes the perception? One of the most interesting ways of dealing with this is to focus on space. As the body gets still, the breath gets still. The sense of boundary on the outside of the body begins to disappear. You’re sitting here in a mist of sensations. It’s like the droplets of mist outside right now. It’s a general kind of vague body shape, but it’s not really defined. And you have the choice of focusing on that vague shape, or you can focus on the spaces between the droplets. That doesn’t have a shape at all. It doesn’t have a boundary. And you’re just letting go. You’ve learned a lesson about the power of perception, the sense of ease that comes with particular perceptions, the sense of disturbance or burdensomeness that comes with others. You’ve got to choose which one you find easier to stay with, which is more expansive, light. Allowing the body to grow still like this is like tuning in your radio. As long as you’re static, you’re going to miss a lot of the signal from the radio station. But when you’re right on the frequency, you begin to see a lot of the subtleties that you missed before. This is why concentration is so important as a basis for discernment. It takes discernment to get the mind to settle down, so that strengthens the discernment. Stillness allows the discernment to be more precise. The same principle applies to the whole practice. Tune into a particular level of sensation, a particular level of how the breath feels, how the mind relates to the present moment, and then just stay there for a while. Get used to being there. Because the more you’re used to being there, it’s like going back and forth over a path. The first time you go, you get some of the details along the side of the path, but if you keep going back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, you’ll see them in a lot more detail. You’re more and more familiar with the path. You get to know every little bit of dirt, every little tree, every little leaf, everything, because you’ve seen it so many times. That’s when you start catching sight of things you missed before. You see that there are levels of stress and suffering you missed the first time around you hit this particular state. Then you learn to look again. What are the activities that create that stress? You catch sight of them moving. You can let them go as well. This ability to discern stress and the ending of stress is something you have to develop over time. It becomes a skill. It requires all the powers of observation, focus, mindfulness, and alertness that any skill requires. It shows its worth in a temporary way as you catch sight of a particular habit in the mind that’s causing stress. You realize you don’t have to use the mind in that way. You don’t have to think in that way, react in that way. You can drop that habit. You have a new alternative, and there’s relatively less stress. But it really shows its worth when you get to the point where all intention stops, all stress stops, and you realize, “This is what the Buddha was talking about. What the Buddha said was true. There really is a deathless.” You’ll be touched in the mind. But you don’t get there just thinking about deathlessness. You get there by making these very precise distinctions, watching them, testing them again and again. In this way, the discernment leads to something that’s not quite like discernment. It’s like the road to Zion Canyon. The road doesn’t look like Zion Canyon, but it takes you there. It’s not the arch. You need to follow the road. Although the road doesn’t resemble the real thing, it takes you there.

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