Path Is in the Details, The

November 23, 2005

Many times we’re drawn to the practice because of the big concepts—oneness, interconnectedness, peace. But when we sit down to meditate, we don’t see any of those things. All we see is confusion. We see the particulars of our mind right here in the present moment, and it gets us frustrated. How can these particulars lead to anything big? Think for a minute. If you’re going to go to the Grand Canyon, what are the directions to the Grand Canyon? They don’t say, “Go north until you hit splendor and then turn right and continue east until you hit vastness.” They say, “Go up Interstate 15 until you hit Interstate 40. Get off at Williams and then head north.” Very specific, down-to-earth instructions. And you have to pay attention to those specific down-to-earth instructions if you’re going to get there. All the things that have to do with driving, watching out for this car, watching out for that car—all the very particular things. It’s by paying attention to them that you get to the big place. It’s the same in the meditation. The present moment in the mind is always made up of particular things, particular thoughts, particular experiences. And especially particular intentions. That’s the crucial thing. So it’s important as you meditate, as you get to know your mind, to look for the particulars. It comes down to something very basic, being honest about your intentions. Many times this is difficult. But it’s the important work, because the intention is the potential for something new in every experience, in every moment. Your past habits, your past tendencies, they color the present moment to some extent, but they don’t have to totally overwhelm it. They don’t have to determine everything that’s going to happen right now. You do have the freedom. Each and every moment, to choose to do the skillful thing, to choose to be honest about your intention, so you can check to see whether it’s skillful or not. And if it’s not skillful, you can drop it. This is all very basic, basic work. But it’s the interstate fifteen and the interstate forty of our practice. It’s the particular cars you have to watch out for, the ones speeding up behind you, the ones stopping in front of you, and your choice of how to handle the traffic. That’s what gets you there. Because the fascinating thing about the present moment is this present intention, the possibility for freedom right here, the possibility for change. It’s what holds everything together. The Buddha talks about experience being composed of the five aggregates. Each aggregate is a potential coming in from the past, and then you actualize it through your fabrication of the present moment, out of the raw materials. There’s a potential for form, a potential for feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness. But with your present intention, you choose how to put it into practice. Put those things together and turn them into actual forms, feelings, perceptions, and so on. This is something very quick. We’re very adept at it. Because it’s so quick, it’s hard for us to catch sight of it. Because we’re so adept at it, we don’t even notice it, like any skill that you can do effortlessly. After a while, you hardly notice it at all. So there is a lot of effort that goes into this, and the question is, is it worth the effort? The Buddha says, ultimately, no. But for the purpose of the path, you have to learn how to put things together in a skillful way. This means looking at your intentions, looking at what motivates them. Is there any greed, anger, and delusion in there? If so, watch out. You have to be willing to test your intentions and to learn from your mistakes. All this is the nuts and bolts of the meditation. But if you keep your awareness on this level, you find you have less and less of a chance of being deluded, and a greater and greater chance of living life skillfully. That’s when we get lost in abstractions. We’re up in the clouds. We can’t see things clearly for what they are. I know someone who went to retreat one time, and the lesson they taught at the end was to try to live your life, view your daily life as an interaction of the Absolute and the Relative. She tried it for a week, and at the end of the week, when she asked me a question about it, the question was so confused. Because the abstraction was actually getting in the way. I think about the teaching on karma. Everyone treats it as if it were kindergarten Buddhism. Some people actually treat it as if it weren’t really Buddhist. It’s something that got picked up by the teachings. Something got thrown into the baggage by mistake when it flew over here from Asia. But that’s not the case. The teaching on karma is absolutely radically central to everything. Your intentions are the big issue in life, the big issue in the practice. They come one by one by one. You can watch them one by one by one, and they have their impact, and you learn how to judge them by seeing their impact and connecting the dots. This kind of intention gives that kind of result. The next time you see it, watch out. If it’s a bad result, if it’s a good result, remember, you still have to watch it carefully. But you want to nurture the skillful ones. The good news here is that, as I said, this is the potential for change in our lives. This is the potential for growth, right here in the specifics of our intentions, the specifics of how they’re motivated, what kind of results they give. That’s how you take advantage of this potential for growth. So be careful not to get lost in the concepts. Keep your eyes on the moment-to-moment arising of intentions. Give yourself a good intention, like when we do in meditation. Give yourself a good intention to hold on to, so the mind can develop the stability and the sense of ease it needs in order to keep watch in the present moment. You’ll find, as time goes on, that the task gets lighter and lighter. You’re more familiar with this spot. As you’re more familiar, you can sense the quality of an intention as it arises, sometimes before it even becomes a coherent thought. You can tell whether this is going in the right direction or the wrong. You deal with it accordingly. This is how our life gets transformed. By paying attention to the details of our actions, the details of our intentions, right here and now. Don’t try to jump over this step too quickly. This is the one we have to pay a lot of attention to. It doesn’t go anywhere else. The attention just gets more and more refined right here. It means it sees more of the details right here. That’s how working with these little things can lead to something really big. As the attention gets more and more refined, you finally get the mind to the point where it’s totally in equilibrium. It doesn’t need any new intentions. It can see that any new intention just makes things worse, even very subtle intentions. It learns how not to intend, and that’s when everything opens up. It’s like one tiny thread that holds a huge tapestry together. You cut the thread and everything unravels. It’s like the mouse that saved the lion because it could eat through the net that had caught the lion. Don’t look down on the little things, because some little things can make a big difference.

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