The Adventure in the Present

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We’re here to train the mind, because, as the Buddha said, it’s when the mind is well-trained that you find happiness. If your mind isn’t trained, it’s like a puppy that hasn’t been trained. No matter how beautiful your house is, the puppy can make a mess anywhere. In other words, no matter how well things may go outside in your life, if your mind is not in good shape, it can make a mess of whatever you’ve got. But you notice that we train the mind by focusing it on the breath. It’s because you can’t, in the beginning of the practice, look directly at your mind. It’s like a light beam. If a light beam doesn’t reflect off anything, you wouldn’t know that it’s there. So we focus on the breath. Focus our attention on the breath. Make the breath a comfortable place to stay. In other words, the whole flow of energy through the body. Take that as your object, wherever it’s most obvious, where it feels comfortable to stay focused, and the breath energy feels comfortable. Stay right there, and then see if you can make it more comfortable. You benefit both ways. The body gets more comfortable. And the mind has a better place to stay. It is possible to focus the mind on pain, and there are stages in the practice when you’ve got to do that. But unless it has a comfortable place to go, it’s not going to stay very long. It’s going to resist. So you overcome the resistance by experimenting with the breath, seeing what works, seeing what doesn’t work, seeing what kind of breathing feels good right now, what kind of breathing doesn’t. And then you choose to stick with breathing that feels good, whatever rhythm or texture of the breath. You can conceive it of coming in and out of the body in lots of different ways. Not just in and out the nose, but the energy channels all around the body, all the way out through the pores. So whatever way of focusing on the breath, whatever way of conceiving the breath feels best, gives the best results. You’ll use that. This is a basic principle in all the Buddhist teachings. You experiment to see what works and what doesn’t work, and then you learn from your experiments. It’s a very reasonable-sounding principle, but many of us aren’t comfortable with it. We’d like to have immediate revelations, instant awakenings, something that changes us into a totally different person. The Buddha basically says, “Don’t think in those terms. Don’t think of what kind of person you are.” Awakening is not a question of looking into your real nature, because the Buddha always leaves that question unanswered. “What is your real nature?” That’s not the issue. The real question is, “What are you doing that’s causing suffering?” In other words, you don’t look at yourself in terms of what you are or think you are. You just look at what you’re doing, and then learn from what you’re doing. Notice your intention, notice the action, and the results. Wherever there’s harm or suffering, you just don’t do that again. You learn from your mistakes. Gradually, over time, you get more and more sensitive. In an impatient world, that’s not necessarily good news, but it can be good news. It’s the news we need to hear that the best things in life come from paying careful attention to what you’re doing. It’s a continual process. It’s a gradual process. The image the Buddha gave of the practice is of the continental shelf off of India, a gradual slope and then a sudden drop-off. We all want the sudden drop-off, but it doesn’t come unless you go through the gradual slope. Why is that? Everything you need to know is right here. You just need to develop your powers of awareness to see your actions, to see their results, and get more and more sensitive to where something works and where something doesn’t work. As you develop your powers of perception, you develop your sensitivity through repeated action, repeated reflection, repeated observation. Your sensitivity finally reaches a point where it really does open up. It opens up into something deathless, something other. So it’s not a distraction to keep focusing on what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing. Many of us don’t like looking at those things. We don’t like seeing our own mistakes. But there’s no other way you’re going to learn. Just remind yourself that everybody makes mistakes. Even the Buddha started out making mistakes, big mistakes. All those years of sensual indulgence followed by the opposite extreme, six years of self-torment, self-affliction, thinking that somehow if you created enough suffering in the body, that would burn away all your impurities, all the impurities of the mind. Well, that doesn’t work because the issue is not the body, the issue is the mind. The Buddha had to make those mistakes before he was able to find the middle way. It wasn’t the case that after six years of really strong effort, he just gave up and said, “Well, effort doesn’t get anywhere. Let’s have a practice of no effort.” Fortunately, he didn’t go in that direction. If he had, we probably wouldn’t remember him, because there have been lots and lots of teachers who’ve taught that over time. It may seem appealing, but it doesn’t really go anywhere. In one of his suttas, he talks about someone who’s trying to get milk out of a cow. Now, one person might try to twist the horn of the cow to get the milk out and may twist and twist and twist and really torment the cow. He doesn’t get any milk. He may come to the conclusion that human effort doesn’t work in getting milk out of cows. But that’s not right. You’re twisting the wrong thing. If you pull the udder of the cow, you get the milk. In other words, you have to make the effort at the right spot. And you’re the right spot. The right spot is your intentions. This is the one thing in the present moment that really is free. Other things you experience through your senses, random thoughts that come popping up in the mind, those things come from past actions. You can’t do much about your past actions, but you can make a difference in what you’re doing in the present, what your intentions are in the present. That fact should attract you. Why is it your intentions are free, or potentially free? What is this potential for freedom right here? Look into that. The best way to look into that is to try to gain some control over your intentions. Make them more and more skillful. Whatever the situation you’re faced with, ask yourself, “What is the most skillful thing to do right here? What is the most skillful thing to say? What is the most skillful thing to think?” “Given the person that I am, what am I likely to think?” That doesn’t go anywhere. Or just reacting to things out of habit. That doesn’t teach you anything new either. Keep asking yourself, “What would be the most skillful thing to say?” It might be unexpected. It might be unusual for you to say that or do that. But give it a try and see what happens. Then greet your mistakes with good cheer. In other words, don’t be happy. Be happy you made a mistake, but at least be willing to admit when you’ve made a mistake. Say, “Okay, I’ve learned that lesson. Not to do that again.” Then try something different the next time around. This is one of the reasons why we spend so much time practicing concentration, because this is directly a practice of your intention. You intend to stay with the breath, and then you try to maintain the breath. In the course of that, you see other intentions coming up. That’s the whole point. You want to see these intentions, because in the past, they slipped in and slipped out without your knowing it. They came in, did their dirty work, and then ran away. All you see are the results. You wonder where they came from. It’s because a lot of your intentions function on a semi-conscious level. What we’re trying to do here is just bring the whole issue up. You intend to stay with the breath, and then you deal with all the distractions and all the other intentions that would pull you off other places. So you learn how to maintain that original intention. This shows you that if you really make up your mind to be more skillful, to be more conscious and deliberate in your intentions, you can do it. Then you get good results. The mind feels more solid. It’s less harassed by reality. It’s less attuned to random things, and you get a greater sense of your power in the present moment. The range of your freedom in the present moment grows larger. Then you apply this new understanding, this new awareness of the mind, to other situations as well. In this way, life becomes an adventure in learning. Whatever the situation, you’re going to try to do the most skillful thing possible, and then keep learning so that you can become more skillful and then more skillful, more sensitive to what it means to be skillful. As that sensitivity develops, you begin to see more subtle intentions in the mind, more subtle things going on. You begin to peel away these layers of delusion, these layers of ignorance, and then the mind will begin to open up to something special. You know exactly how it happens. You know exactly what you did. When you do have your first taste of the deathless, one of the things that confirms you is an understanding of what human action is, what the intention was, the power of intention. This is one of the reasons why people who’ve tasted that first level of awakening would not dare overstep the precepts. They know that acting on an unskillful intention really does cause harm down the line. When you know that, why would you intentionally do anything harmful? It also lets them see that there is something in the range of awareness that goes beyond our sense of who we are. This is why the Buddha was never really interested in the question of who we are and what our real nature is. Because whatever you conceive yourself as, it’s only partial. It’s a limitation. So, the experience teaches you not to assume who you are. You simply look at what you’re doing, what the results are. At the same time, it ends your doubts about the Buddha. You realize that when he was talking about the deathless, he really meant what he said. He wasn’t just talking in a metaphorical way or just shooting the breeze. He had a direct experience of the deathless, and it really did free him from suffering. You know, because you followed the path that he taught and you got the same results. This is much more valuable than anything else you can do, anything else you can discover in life. So it’s worth our while to pay a lot of attention here and to take on this exercise, this adventure, in learning to be skillful in taking on this challenge, doing the most skillful thing, saying the most skillful thing, thinking the most skillful thing in any given situation. The practice of concentration and mindfulness helps give the mind the power and the refreshment it needs in order to be up for that adventure. So it’s not onerous. It’s not drudgery. It’s fun. It’s a challenge that you enjoy trying to meet. Because the more you do meet it, the more the mind gets a sense of well-being, a sense of inner worth, and the better everything is in your life all around. So pay attention right here because this is where all the important things in life are being decided. Make sure that you’re helping make the decision as skillful as possible.

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