All of a Piece

April 24, 2007

The Buddha once noted that there are four kinds of action. Things you like to do that give good results. Things you don’t like to do that give bad results. Things you like to do that give bad results. And things you don’t like to do that give good results. With the first two, you don’t have to think much. The things you like to do and give good results, you go ahead and do them. The things you don’t like to do and give bad results, you don’t go anywhere near. It’s the last two, Buddha said, that constitute the measure of your wisdom, the measure of your discernment, your ability to talk yourself into doing the things that you don’t like to do but give good results, and the ability to talk yourself out of doing things that you like to do but give bad results. It’s a very down-to-earth, pragmatic definition of wisdom. And it doesn’t apply just to the beginning parts of the practice. It applies all the way through. It’s the Buddha’s way of looking at things. They’re not things, they’re events. They’re part of a causal chain. Everything you do, is shaped by an intention, which may be skillful or unskillful. And the quality of the intention shapes the results, determines whether they’re going to lead to happiness or to pain. And this doesn’t apply only to physical actions or verbal actions. It applies to actions in the mind as well. So the lessons you learn on an everyday level, seeing that the things you like to do give bad results, your ability to say no, that’s good practice for your meditation. It’s good practice for gaining discernment. It’s good practice for awakening. The principle applies all the way through. The same thing for things that you don’t like to do but give good results, your ability to get yourself to do those things. Even something simple like getting up on a cold morning to meditate. Or you’d much rather lie in your sleeping bag, all nice and toasty and warm. That’s practice for awakening. After all, what is the no-bladeful path? It’s a kind of karma. As the Buddha said, it’s the karma that puts an end to karma. Your views are part of that karma. Right concentration is part of that karma. So it’s something you develop where it’s skillful, and then you try to make it more and more skillful until you finally get to the point where you don’t need it anymore. Then you can drop it. For example, with concentration, you try to get the mind to stay with its object. There’s an intention there, there’s an activity there, and there are going to be results. You try to do it more and more skillfully. In the very beginning, you are very conscious that this is something that you’re doing. You sit there wondering, “When does it get to the point where I don’t have to do it? Is this on its own?” As long as you’re practicing concentration, there’s going to be a doing, there’s going to be an activity. It’s simply that you get more skilled at it. It comes more naturally. But it requires the same wisdom that goes into getting up on a cold morning when you don’t want to. Keep focusing the mind on the breath, whether you feel like it or not. At the same time, you stay awake. Stay away from distractions, whether you want to follow them or not. You have to develop the mind state that your wants and your likes are not reliable, especially when you see that they lead in the wrong direction. You’ve got to learn strategies for saying no. Sometimes it’s the no, not just plain no. Other times it’s more roundabout. This is where your skill as a meditator comes in. That way, you can begin to tune into more and more refined levels of concentration. First, just getting the mind concentrated is quite an accomplishment. Then, keeping it there. Once you get really good at a particular level of concentration, in other words, you can tap into it whenever you want, you’ve got to look into it. There is that tendency, once you start tapping into the mind, and it gets easier and easier, you lose sight of the efforts you put into it. You feel like you’ve tuned into the real you, or some cosmic ground of being, especially on the higher levels of concentration. The Buddha reminds you again and again and again that these are activities. You’re doing something here. There’s an element of intention, even though you may be tuning into something that’s already there. There’s an element of intention in your tuning in, which shapes your experience of that already there. And he wants to make sure that you see that. You see concentration as an action. You see it under the framework of karma. It helps prevent you from falling into a lot of misunderstandings. Some on the issues of discernment, seeing things as inconstant, stressful, not self. You look at these three things, these three characteristics, in the light of what you’re doing. After all, what are you doing? You’re trying to find happiness. Do you want a happiness that’s inconstant? No. Do you want one that’s stressful? No. One that you can’t control? No. So these are the ways you gauge how well you’re doing on your path. Even the whole issue of self and not self. The Buddha doesn’t look at these as things. He looks at the activity of holding to a view about self and not self. This is important. The Buddha denies the existence of a small self, but he seems to imply that there’s a larger, connected self. That’s putting words in his mouth. The way he talks about people’s views of self, it covers everything. Form, formless, finite, infinite, a little self inside the body, like a little homunculus, or your body inside this much larger self. However you define self, he said, that comes under the issue of not self-teaching. Just don’t think in those terms, ideally. But like karma, it’s not that when you learn that you’re trying to put an end to karma, you just stop doing it. You do your actions, but you’re trying to make them more and more skillful. In the same way, the way you hold to an idea of self, your “I” making and your “my” making, these are activities that you continue doing on the path for a while, but you learn how to make them more and more skillful. Instead of being the kind of “I” who’s constantly wandering around and being sloppy, you learn to be an “I” who’s more meticulous, more scrupulous about what you do when you say. And that becomes an “I” who’s more meticulous in how you concentrate. You look at the Buddhist teachings on meditation, and he uses the word “I” a lot, “my” a lot. As long as you’re going to have a sense of self, learn to make it skillful. And it’s by having that sense of self that you feel inclined to work for a goal that’s not immediate. Something’s going to take time. Otherwise, you’d say, “To hell with it. I’m going to grab what pleasure I can right now.” The sense of self that tells you, “Okay, you’ve got to put up with some difficulties right now because you will experience happiness later on.” That’s what keeps you on the path. Then, ultimately, you get to the point where you begin to see that that self, even though you like it, is beginning to cause trouble in very subtle ways. Sometimes not so subtle, but hopefully, as you’ve been getting it more and more skillful, the trouble it causes gets more and more subtle until you realize that that’s the only thing that’s standing in the way between you and true happiness. You see that idea of self, of the person who’s in charge of the meditation or who’s commenting on what’s going on, that’s the troublemaker. That’s the one disturbance remaining. And that’s when you let it go. In the same way, letting go of action, letting go of karma. All these things are varieties of action. You practice from the very beginning, working on the precepts, working on concentration, developing discernment, the Buddha as you view it. All these things in terms of actions. Take the lessons you learn about, very simple things about learning how to abstain from things you know are harmful and to do things that you’d rather not do but you know are going to be good for you. You apply that same principle to the concentration practice. You apply the same principle to developing discernment on the more subtle levels. So it’s all of a piece. This is why the attitude that learns how to go against your ingrained habits. You can look at things in terms of action and result and realize that if you want to do the things that give good results and you want to avoid the things that give bad results, regardless of whether you like those activities or not, you focus on the results. Developing those habits on an outside level helps you develop them on the inside level as well. This way, all the good things you do are all of a piece. The good you do on an external level is a very important contribution to the good that you’re going to find inside.

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