Actor & Experiencer

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Try to be on good terms for the present moment. Learn how to bring yourself to the present moment in a way that you’re bringing a good mood with you. In other words, when you stop to think about the fact that you’ve got this opportunity here in the present moment, even if you’ve been having a bad day or having trouble with other people or are kind of down on yourself, remind yourself that at least you’ve got the opportunity to be here in the present moment. At the moment, there are no other responsibilities. Think of what a rare opportunity this is in the world. Think of all the people out there who are from the moment they wake up to the moment they go to sleep. People are concerned about where the next meal is going to come from, the dangers they’re facing. Life on this planet can be pretty miserable, and here you’ve got the opportunity to do something about it. To that much, it’s something good to focus on. What are you going to do about it? You’ve got the breath and you’ve got the mind. You’ve got all the raw materials for awakening. It’s simply a matter of putting them together and learning how to put them together in the right way. You don’t want to force things too much. You don’t want to be too lazy about it. This is a matter of learning a skill. As you’re learning a skill, don’t berate yourself for how long it’s taking you or wonder about how much longer it’s going to be before you get results, because that’s weighing the present moment down in a way that’s not helpful at all. Each moment is an opportunity, so you focus on the opportunity you have right now. As for how long you’ve been working at this, put that aside. As for how much longer it’s going to be, put that aside as well. I remember several times, when I was in Thailand, I’d hear Jon Fung’s students commenting on how long they’d been practicing. He’d immediately jump on this and say, “Don’t think about that. You’ve got this opportunity right now.” And the way it is with karma, given the fact that karma is so unpredictable, you never know when the breakthrough is going to come. If things aren’t going well now, they could at any moment go very well. At the very least, you can contribute to that. When you’re thinking about karma, you think about all the past to get you tied up in knots. The whole point of the teaching on karma is that you want to focus on what you can do right now, the opportunities you have right now, and that you want to make the most of them based on the level of skill and sensitivity that you have. And don’t berate yourself for not being skillful yet, because there’s only one way you’re going to get skillful, and it’s not by berating yourself. It’s by applying your skills as you have them. It’s like exercising the body. You don’t have to wait until the body is strong before you exercise. You take the body you’ve got and exercise it. And as you exercise it, it turns into a stronger body. It’s the same with the good qualities of the mind. Your sensitivity may not be what it could be. Your understanding of the process of meditation may not be what it could be. But you take what you’ve got and you apply it, and you learn from applying it. And as you do this, you begin to see there are two sides to the mind. There’s the side that’s doing the meditation and the side that’s receiving the results. This is essentially what our sense of self comes down to. It’s these two things, the actor and then the experiencer. We identify with certain powers that we have, certain abilities we have, because we’ve found that by using them we’ve learned how to alter our surroundings, alter our situation. They seem to be at least somewhat in our power. So that’s the self as actor. And then there’s the self as experiencer, the one that gets to experience the pleasure or the pain that comes from our actions. And you want to keep those in the right balance as well. In other words, you want to keep at the meditation, doing the meditation. This is why we have techniques. A while back I read about someone who was making sneering remarks about meditation techniques, as if that were the technique we’re getting in the way. Well, the technique is what enables you to have some sense of what your powers are, give you a baseline for comparison, what’s working and what’s not. You have to be very clear about what you’re doing if you want to learn how to do it well. So you have the technique, and then you ask yourself, “What are the results I’m getting from this technique? Could I do it better?” “In what way could I do it better, and what does better mean?” “Do you need more stillness? Do you need more gladness? What’s lacking?” And then you take what you’ve learned from that, and then you apply it to how you continue working with the technique. This is how the experiencer and the actor are in proper balance. If you just act, act, act, act, act, without noticing how the results are coming, you’re going to end up pushing yourself too hard. You’re going to end up getting yourself into strange states, because you need to be able to modulate and regulate what you’re doing if the experiencer takes over. In other words, there’s a sense of ease, a sense of refreshment that comes from meditation, and you just jump into it like a big feather bed. Then the cause for the ease is going to be undercut. It’s like seeing a big cloud and thinking, “Ah, this cloud is going to be comfortable.” As you jump into the cloud, of course, you find that you fall right through. Or the analogy I gave this afternoon of the person who gets a job. You work, work, work, and you get your first big paycheck, and then you just quit the job and go living off your paycheck. Then, when you run out of money, you come back and try to get another new job. Well, for one thing, they’re never going to give you a job that’s well-paying, and you never build up your capital. You never build up your savings. You want to be the kind of worker who keeps working and keeps saving up, saving up, and spending enough to enjoy, to have some sense of satisfaction. That comes from doing the job, but not splurging everything you’ve got and not quitting the job. There’s work to be done. The actor here has to keep on working. So you want the actor and the experiencer to work together like this. It’s in this way that the meditation becomes a skill. It’s also the way you develop the proper attitude. We often think of pleasure as an end in and of itself, but the Buddha’s attitude is that pleasure can be a means. Certain pleasures can be means. Certain pleasures are just problems, obstacles in the path. When you get waylaid by lust, sensual desire, those are hindrances, the roots of unskillful behavior. But the pleasure that comes from a centered mind, a clear mind, that’s something you want to learn how to use. Use it as a means for greater insight. Use it as a means for energizing you further on the path. At the same time, the Buddha also said that pain can be a useful means on the path as well. In other words, as you learn how to deal with pain in the course of the meditation, you learn a lot of important lessons about the mind. So pain has its uses, too. After all, it is a noble truth. Learning how to understand pain is part of the path. So you want to be able to learn to use both pleasure and pain in the proper way. This is when the actor and the experiencer, again, are working together. They’re properly balanced. So what this means is that you still have a sense of self while you meditate. It’s not like you’re trying to erase the “I,” erase the “me,” in a big oceanic feeling. Instead, you’re taking your sense of “I” and “me” and you’re learning how to apply them skillfully. So the actor becomes a skillful actor, the experiencer becomes a connoisseur, a discerning experiencer. So that your sense of self, instead of being an obstacle in the path, actually becomes a means for developing. As the canon says, there’s going to be a sense of “I am” all the way up through non-returning. So don’t expect to drop it any time soon. What that means is, as long as you’ve got it, learn how to use it. This comes down to the principle of John Lee, repeated many times, according to John Fouin, which is that a person of discernment can learn how to use almost anything as a means for furthering your mindfulness, furthering your concentration, furthering your powers of discernment. So learn the proper uses for what you’ve got. And how do you learn? Patience, endurance, using your powers of observation. After all, this is a skill we’re working on. Skills sometimes develop slowly, sometimes they develop quickly. One of our problems in modern society is that in our education, people get channeled into areas where they show an aptitude. They start specializing very early. What’s missing there, though, is the ability to learn in areas where you don’t immediately have an aptitude. But they’re important skills that everybody needs. Whether it comes easily or not, the important thing is that you apply yourself. You need to understand what’s going on in the present moment, what the potentials of the present moment are, how the potential for pleasure can be used, how the potential for pain has its uses, how the potentials from which you create your sense of “I,” either as the actor or the experiencer, how to make the best use of them. You’ve got this opportunity. It’s a whole hour to sit here, and then when the hour is over, you go back and meditate some more. You’re really fortunate. Not just while you’re here at the monastery. If you have to go back home and there’s less time still, you can make some time in the day to work on the meditation directly, and then as you apply the lessons you’ve learned from the meditation in daily life. People used to come. You hear this story that’s related to John Cha, John Fung, and John Lee. People say, “I don’t have time to meditate.” The answer always is, “Do you have time to breathe?” Well, yes. Okay, you’ve got the basis there for learning how to develop good qualities around that time you have to breathe. This is what it means to be a meditator. You make the most of the opportunities you’ve got, wherever they are. And as you keep looking for these opportunities, you’ll find them in many places where you didn’t expect them.

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