Step Back

December 18, 2007

There’s a famous passage where the Buddha says that having good friends, good companions, is the whole of the holy life. In the Buddha’s explanation, he says to Ananda, “If it weren’t for the Buddha, we never would have found out about the path. We’d all be groping around.” So our ability to practice, to practice, depends entirely on his having discovered the path. To that extent, we have to depend on him. Without him, this path we’re following, I doubt that we’d be following it. We’d be off someplace else, doing something else, trying to find happiness in some other way. But the role of having good friends in the practice doesn’t end there. There’s another passage where the Buddha is talking to Rahula, his son, at the time Rahula is about seven years old. He’s saying, “If you’ve done anything or said anything that you realize has caused harm, go talk it over to somebody else on the path, a good friend in the holy life.” This develops good habit, the ability to be open with other people. Notice he doesn’t say to talk over everything that goes on in your mind. You don’t have to mention that to other people, but sometimes it’s helpful to get a good perspective. This is why we have questions and answers, and why it’s good to have a teacher around, because sometimes you can get stuck in your little world and not be able to find the way out. Of course, this doesn’t mean that every difficulty should be talked over, but you take what skills you’ve learned, what points of view you’ve learned, and try to apply them. When you find that you can’t get out of that particular state of mind, go over and talk it over. Get somebody else’s perspective on it. Choose that person wisely. Choose someone whose wisdom you trust. Try to get a sense of where they’re coming from, how they step back from their problems as well, so ultimately you don’t have to go ask. As soon as the question pops up in your mind, you’d have a good idea. What would the Buddha do? What would the Buddha say? What would Ajahn Lee say? How about Ajahn Chah or Ajahn Mahaprabhu? Where would they step back? What perspective would they give on your problems? Because it’s this ability to step back that’s what saves us. Otherwise, we’re totally absorbed in our bhava, our little state of becoming, our sense of who we are and the world we’re in, and the shape and contours of that world. Once you’re in what they call a “becoming,” you don’t see everything. You start out with a kernel of a particular desire or craving. Then you cling to it. That combination of craving and clinging is the seed around which this world of becoming develops. On the one hand, there’s a sense of who you are, what kind of person you are, based on that craving. And as we all know, we have multiple cravings. And so we have multiple senses of who we are. So one of your selves may get down on another one of the selves. Once you have that particular sense of yourself, then you look at the world around you, and it’s colored by what the craving is. You tend to see the things that are relevant to that craving, i.e., the things that help you achieve what you want or the things that get in the way. And other things get totally blotted out. There’s that story of a psych experiment where people are asked to watch kids playing a game and try to figure out what the rules of the game are. And they’re very intent on watching the kids. At some point in the video, a person in a gorilla suit goes walking through. And then after the video is over, instead of asking people what the rules of the game were, they say, “Did you see the person in the gorilla suit?” And most people don’t. They’re too intent on watching the game and trying to figure it out. So there are a lot of things going on in your world that you just don’t see. And that’s why it’s important that you be able to step back. In the beginning, it’s helpful to have somebody else’s perspective. They’re in another state of becoming. Or ideally, they’ve learned how to step out of becoming in general. But at least they may have had practice in stepping out. They can tell you what questions to ask, because it’s a question. That’s usually what gets you out. It’s something that you’ve taken for granted, and you have to learn how to question that. So when you find yourself bound up in a particular state of mind that seems to weigh you down, the first question to ask is, “What are the assumptions I’m going on here?” And then learn to question them. Oftentimes, you’ll find that there are things that you believe in really intently, and part of the mind will resist the questioning. It’ll say, “Of course, this is the way things have to be. This is the way you have to look at it.” So you have to question the “of course” ideas. Question your “of course” assumptions. Simply, as a thought experiment, ask yourself, “What would the world be like if you believed the opposite?” This was a John Lee’s test for anything that came up in meditation. Flip it around, he said, and ask yourself, “What if the opposite was true?” Now, you may not want to believe the opposite, but at least it’s getting you out of your original point of view. Or point of craving, actually. And that can get you past a lot of problems. Even in the practice of meditation, you have to learn how to step back. There’s that image of the person sitting, watching the person lying down, or the person standing, watching the person sitting. Learn how to step out of your concentration sometimes to see what’s going on. What exactly are you doing? This is how wisdom and discernment arise in the practice, through your ability to step back. And along with this, you want to develop the ability to laugh at yourself. Because that’s what stepping back often does. You suddenly see how stupid it was to assume what you were holding onto. There’s that phrase in some place in the Greek tradition, “The gods are the ones who laugh,” because the gods are stepping back. They watch human beings, and human beings are so wound up in their tragedies. But the gods are up there laughing. Now, they sound heartless and cruel, but maybe it’s because they’ve got a different point of view, a better point of view. There’s a story in Thai literature about a couple who were cursed to fall down into the human realm. The husband tried to use his wife to tempt a hermit out of his concentration. The hermit saw what was happening and cursed them both, “You’re going to have to be born as human beings, and you’re going to fall in love, and you’re going to have to be separated three times before you get back up again.” That’s just the introduction to the poem. And then the poem goes on for a long period of time as you get to know these two people as human beings. And you really get totally involved in their story, which is a very sad story. Again, they meet each other, and they fall in love, and they get separated. And finally, the third time in the separation, the guy sees his beloved in the forest, attacked by a tiger and eaten by the tiger. It turns out it’s the devas in the forest who have made up this vision. She’s not actually being attacked. She’s not even there. But he sees this, and he gets so distraught that he commits suicide. And then she comes along. She finds him dead. She commits suicide. It’s all very sad. Next thing you know, they’re both up back in heaven, laughing the whole thing over. End of the curse. The point is that in the world you’re inhabiting right now, maybe you’re not in the actual world of what’s going on. So it’s good to be able to talk things over. If you don’t have a good teacher immediately around to talk it over with, well, imagine that you do. So if you’re talking with John Lee, if you’re talking to Ajahn Fu, what would they say? How would they look at you if you presented them with your problem? How would they smile and then say, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Something that would catch you completely off-guard. That way, you keep perspective on your practice. So if you develop this ability to step back and cultivate the ability to learn how to laugh at yourself, that will often keep you on track.

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