NR The Ways of the World

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When the Buddha described right mindfulness, he talked about a whole cluster of mental qualities. Mindfulness, alertness, ardency. Keeping focused on one theme in and of itself. It could be the body in and of itself, or feelings in and of themselves. Mind states mental qualities in and of themselves. The in and of themselves is the important part. For instance, with the body, say you’re focused on the breath. You’re looking at the breath simply as it is, without getting involved in a lot of narratives about it. Particularly any narratives that have to do with the world outside. That’s the other part of the basic formula, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. For the most part, our sense of our body and our feelings and our mind states is tied up with what we like and don’t like about the world, what we want out of the world. For instance, we look at our bodies in terms of, are they attractive to other people? Are they strong enough to do the work we want? Are they healthy enough to live for a long time in the world? That sort of thing. In other words, it’s the body, not in and of itself, but the body in the world. We pull out of the world as our context and simply look at the experience in and of itself. What is it like to have a body right here, right now? What are the issues of the body on its own terms? It’s important that we have this separate context, because we tend to get so tied up in the world, what we want out of it and what we don’t like about it. What we want to change in the world, what we don’t want to see change in the world. And yet, what does the world have to offer? As the Buddha said, it’s basically eight things. There’s material gain and there’s material loss. Status, loss of status. Praise, criticism. Pleasure and pain. That’s it. Those are the things we run after. We run after the positive ones. We run after the gain and the status and the praise and the pleasure. But as you notice, these things come in pairs. Wherever there’s material gain, there’s going to be material loss. Wherever there’s status, there’s loss of status. And so on down the line. We want these things to be associated with a certain way, and we twist and turn in our lives to try to make them be that certain way. They don’t really last. After all, these things do belong to the world. They don’t belong to us. Material gain. Look at the dollar bills with which you buy things. Is your name on the dollar bill? No. It’s not really yours. It passes through your hand. The same with status. Whatever status you may gain, it’s not that you’re the only person who will ever be entitled to that. The world can give it. The world can take it away. The same with praise and criticism. You can do your absolute best, do a wonderful job, and there will always be somebody to criticize you. These things are like wheels. They turn, but they’re not like ordinary wheels. They’re more like gears in a machine. If you get caught up in these things, it’s like getting the sleeve of your shirt caught up in the gears in the machine. It just keeps pulling in, pulling in, pulling in. If you don’t quickly take off the shirt, you’re going to get pulled in and mangled as well. So this is why we have to develop this alternative context. It’s the body. It’s the movement of itself. Learning how to stay there, regardless of what the issues are outside. John Lee makes a comparison. He says it’s like the axle on the wheel, or the center point on the wheel. The wheel turns around, but the center point stays still. You want to have that position of staying still in the midst of all this, and realizing that you’re going to be okay. That your happiness doesn’t have to depend on things turning up in the way you want them to. It’s a greater sense of well-being that comes from that stillness that you try to maintain in the midst of all the turnings of the world. This is what you keep in mind, in the mindfulness of Right Mindfulness. If you can find a stillness, then you’re okay. If you can find a still center, say, with a breath, then hold on to it. Learn how to value it. That means investing it, putting in time, putting in energy, to be able to maintain this sense of context and to develop a sense of well-being within it, so you don’t get caught up in the spinnings of the world. This way you can lift your mind above it. It’s another image from the Canon of the heightened mind, the mind that can be above the spinning. It knows it, but it doesn’t spin around along with it. Another image is of a stone pillar, sixteen spans long, eight spans wide. Eight spans of which are buried underground in a solid rock mountain, so that no matter which direction the wind blows from, it goes through the eight directions, which are like the eight qualities of the world. Good things blow past, the mind doesn’t shake. Bad things blow past, the mind doesn’t shake. That’s the kind of state that you want to develop, because if your happiness depends on things spinning in a particular way, they’re just going to keep on spinning around. It’s not like Wheel of Fortune, where things will end up on a particular number. They hit a particular number, and then they go on to the next number, and then the next. So you have to realize that no matter how nice the things of the world are, and the Buddha said they are nice, status is nice, material gain is nice, but they have their drawbacks. So what you want to learn is to put your mind in a position where you don’t take these things all so seriously. You don’t grab on to them as yours. They’re simply there for you to use. When there’s material gain, learn how to use it wisely. Learn how to be generous with it. There’s another one of a John Lee’s analogy. It’s a sentence like taking a coconut and squeezing the coconut milk out of the flesh. The actual material gain or the status, that’s like the flesh. The goodness you get out of it, that’s the coconut milk. In other words, you develop the virtue of generosity, the mental quality of generosity. And as for the material side, that’s the flesh that’s left over after you squeeze the coconut milk out. In other words, in being generous with the things, you’ve gotten the best things you can get out of material things, a good quality of the mind. The same with status. When you have status, you have power. How are you going to use that power? Use it wisely to help people. You’ve gotten the good things that status has to offer. Then when the time comes when you’ve lost that status, there are no regrets. When praise comes, you have to be careful. When someone is praising you, why are they praising you? You may like praise, but sometimes it’s coming from someone whose motives for giving the praise are not all that reliable. So you have to be careful. Other times they’re praising you because they want you to get better. That’s always the next question. If they praise you, what things could you do better to make you even more skilled at whatever you’ve done? When they criticize you, as the Buddha says, regard that person as someone who’s pointed out treasure. It shows you where a weakness is, something that you can work on. Pain and pleasure have their good and bad side as well. If you take pain and pleasure simply as ends in and of themselves, you’ve lost your foundation and right mindfulness and go spitting out after the world. Some pleasures are meant to be examined, because they do tend to intoxicate the mind. How can you live in a world that has these pleasures without getting intoxicated by them, without doing stupid and foolish things around them? Other pleasures are meant to be developed, the pleasure of right concentration. It gives you an alternative sense of well-being, so you don’t have to keep gobbling down the cheap pleasures of the world. You’ve got something better. As for pain, as the Buddha said, it can be treated as a noble truth. You can learn from it, instead of getting upset about it. You realize there are lessons to learn how to live in a world where there is pain and yet not suffer. Loss of wealth and loss of status have their positive sides as well. You can learn from them, too. When you’ve lost your status, you see what the world is like. The people who were nice to you because of your status, you get to see them from another side. As Ajahn Lee once said, when you’ve lost your status, some people call you a dog. Dogs have their advantages, too. There are no laws for dogs. If you have a particular status, you have to behave in a particular way. When you’ve lost wealth, again, it’s a difference. You see the world from the point of view of someone who doesn’t have anything that anybody wants out of you. You see who your true friends are. So we can keep the mind in the middle like this. We’ll keep the mind above these things. You’ll learn how to use them. You’ll see that all these things have their good side and their bad side. When the wheel comes up with something good, you learn how to use it without getting intoxicated, without getting infatuated. When the bad side comes up, you learn whatever lessons it has to offer. That way you can live in the world without being trampled by the world. You can live above it a little bit without getting yourself pulled into the gears. So it’s important that we try to develop this sense of a good, solid center. Live with the body in and of itself, with feelings in and of themselves, just watching these things as they arise, as they pass away, and learning how to take that as our basic context, as our foundation, as our frame of reference. This is what you keep in mind as you deal with the waves of the world. They spin around, but you don’t have to spin around after them. In that case, you don’t get dizzy. You can keep your head when other people are losing theirs. That way you benefit and the people around you have a good example as well.

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