Choices in the Present

June 2, 2009

As you bring your attention to the present moment, it’s important that you understand that the present moment is shaped by two sorts of things, influences coming from your past actions and your present intentions. What this means is that you’re constantly playing a role in shaping your present reality. Now, that role is going to be limited by the range of options that come from your past actions that happen to be blossoming right now or bearing fruit right now. But you do have a range of options. The Buddha’s image is of a field, lots of seeds in the field, and it’s up to you to decide which ones you’re going to water, which ones are going to sprout right now. So what this means is that when something comes up in the mind, it’s not the only reality there is. You have a choice to go with it or not. The idea that you simply sit with whatever comes up obscures the fact that lots of different things could be coming up right now, and that you do have a choice of what’s worth focusing on and what’s not worth focusing on. Simply the act of focusing on a particular topic encourages it. But then you have to ask yourself, “Is this particular emotion or feeling coming up in the mind right now something to be encouraged or not?” This is where the Buddha’s teachings and the Four Noble Truths come in. The Buddha didn’t simply sit around thinking, “Hey, what would be four nice truths to teach to people? Or how about five? Or how about three?” He wasn’t thinking in random terms that way. He said there are four types of things that are really worth focusing on, and each of them entails a different duty, a different task. There’s stress, and the task there is to comprehend it. There’s the cause of stress, and the task there is to let it go. There’s a cessation of stress, and that’s to be realized. And then there’s a path to a cessation of stress, and that’s to be developed. So in any given moment, there are four different things you could be doing. So if you’ve been practicing a meditation method that tells you to do just one thing, whatever’s coming up, or just be with whatever’s coming up, it’s missing three duties. And even just being with something is not necessarily any one of those four duties at all. So you have a range of options. And it’s good to take advantage of that, because as a meditator, another one of the Buddha’s images is that you’re a warrior. There are battles to be fought here, in particular you’re battling your greed, anger, and delusion. You’re battling your tendency to create unnecessary stress and suffering. And as in any battle, or as with any warrior, you have to decide which battles should be taken up right now. Which ones are you ready for? Which ones do you put off to the side? Simply by putting things off to the side doesn’t mean you’re denying that they’re there. It simply means you’re not ready for that particular battle yet. You’ve got to find allies. That’s the developing of the path part. You need to develop mindfulness, concentration, discernment, all the factors of the path, because they’re your allies in trying to comprehend suffering and letting go of its cause. Because to comprehend it, you do have to sit with it and you do have to watch it to see when it comes, when it goes, and what comes along with it, and what goes when it goes away. So you can see that connection of cause and effect. As I mentioned this morning, for most of us, our understanding of things is like connecting the dots. There are a few dots here and a few dots there, and you can make any picture from them at all. But the only way to check to see if the picture is accurate is to stick with things over time. Now, to stick with the uncomfortable things coming up in the mind requires that you have strength in order to withstand them, so that you don’t just fall in with them, so that you’re not suffering while you’re watching the suffering. That’s why you have to develop mindfulness and alertness, develop concentration. Because as concentration comes, it gives a sense of well-being. We sit here with the breath. The breath feels good coming in, feels good going out, and you make it feel better and better and better coming in, better going out. And you take that sense of well-being and allow it to suffuse the body. The Buddha talks of kneading it through the body the same way that you would knead moisture through a ball of dough, to the point where the whole ball of dough is saturated with moisture. You want to be able to breathe in and out in a way that the whole body feels saturated with a sense of ease, refreshment, well-being, rapture. And then when you can tap into that, maintain that, then you can carry it into other situations. You’ve got your reinforcements, you’ve got your allies. So as we’re meditating here, trying to get the breath comfortable, trying to get the mind at ease in the present moment, it’s not just so that it would feel nice right here and now. We’re developing important skills and ability to create a sense of well-being in the present moment. In any situation, all you have to do is breathe and learn to be sensitive to the breath. And you find that not only does it send a sense of ease through the body, but it also soothes the mind. It helps to heal any wounds in the mind—places where you felt deprived, places where you felt hurt, wounded. This helps to ease a lot of the feeling of rawness that goes along there. And then when you’re feeling healed and strengthened, you don’t want to just leave that sense of well-being here in the spot where you’re meditating. You want to take it with you. Tap into that skill whenever it’s needed so you’re not facing all the troubles of being a human being alone. You’ve got your reinforcements, your allies. You’re coming from a position of strength. That’s when you can start looking at the stress, looking at the suffering, so you can see exactly where it comes from. And you’ll see that it’s coming from a particular action that you’re doing in the mind, a particular movement of craving, clinging. When you can see that act of craving or clinging in the mind and see that it’s causing stress and that you don’t have to do it, that’s when you can let go. Letting go here means that you just learn to stop doing it. You don’t feel compelled to keep doing it over and over again. So it’s not an act of indulgence to sit here and concentrate the mind and to put disturbing emotions aside, disturbing situations aside. You’re not in denial. You’re simply being pragmatic. You’re learning an important strategy. Another important skill to learn in the meditation is when to let the mind rest and when to put it to work. If it’s working, working, working all the time, it’s going to wear out. The sense of well-being is going to go. You have to figure out when to just sit here and be very still and when to take up issues that have come up in your life. If you find that you’re analyzing something and it’s beginning to become clear and you’re learning how to let go of things, okay, keep at it. That’s a sign that you’re up for that particular task, up for understanding that particular problem. But if the more you think about something, the duller the mind seems, then it’s a time to rest. That’s where you learn how to manage your mind and get a sense of which of those duties is appropriate and what you develop right now. After all, the path does have all those different factors. Sometimes you develop the analyzing side that goes along with wisdom and discernment. Other times you develop the calmer side that goes along with concentration, equanimity, serenity. So you have lots of options here in the present moment. You’re not just stuck with whatever comes up. You realize that in this field of seeds you have, there are lots of different kinds of seeds. There are weeds, but then there’s also wheat, and there’s rice, and there’s all kinds of good food. You ask yourself if you’re going to sit here feeding on the weeds or feeding on the poisonous plants, or are you going to feed on the food? The more you feed on healthy food, then when the poisonous plants do come up, you learn, “I don’t need to eat that because I’ve got better food than this. I can look at it and I can uproot it, and that’s the end of the problem.” So that it doesn’t mature and leave behind seeds to create more poisonous plants. So there are four different potential tasks you have here as a meditator. There’s the comprehending, the letting go, the realizing, and the developing. You want to choose which is the appropriate duty to perform at any one particular time. Sometimes you have to do a little bit of the comprehending first before the mind is ready to develop concentration. In other words, if a particular thought keeps coming back at you again and again and again, think about it in such a way that you realize you don’t need to go there. This is where the analysis is helpful. As I say, sometimes discernment sometimes fosters concentration. Your mind says, “This is the way the human condition is. Nobody paid me to be born as a human being. I wanted to do it.” So this is what comes along with the territory. You gain a sense of objectivity about what your problems are. That contemplation, we chant on a regular basis, “I’m subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. I’m an heir to my actions.” That’s only part of the contemplation that the Buddha recommended. He went on to say, “Stop to think about the fact that all beings in all levels of being, from the lowest levels of hell on up to the highest levels of heaven, are all subject to aging, illness, death, and separation.” It’s not just you. That gives you a larger perspective on things. So it’s easier to let go of whatever particular sufferings you’re feeling right now, or at least to put them aside and give yourself some space to work on the mind so that you have the strength and you have the reinforcements that you need in order to dig deeper into this particular tendency you have to create suffering, to figure out why it’s happening, what you can do to put an end to it. Because there is an end to suffering. And it’s not just equanimity or acceptance. The end to suffering comes when you dig down and see, “Oh, there are things that I’ve been feeding on. I’ve been looking for happiness in the wrong places, but now I’ve got something better to feed on. I don’t have to go feeding in those old places anymore.” So that when you let go, it’s not letting go out of disgust or disappointment or aversion. It’s simply that you’ve matured. Your skill level has taken you to a higher level. Ultimately, you bring the mind to a point where it doesn’t need to feed at all. As they say, the person who’s gained awakening is a person totally without hunger, because the mind has found the happiness that doesn’t require feeding in any way at all. That’s when dispassion becomes complete and you actually go even beyond dispassion. That’s the goal that we have. At that point, all the tasks of the Four Noble Truths are ended. But in the meantime, when you haven’t reached that level yet, remember, you’ve got all these different options here in the present moment—the things you can comprehend, the things you let go, the things you develop, the things you realize. And as for anything that doesn’t fit into those four categories, you don’t have to pay it much attention at all. This is where the real work of the practice is. In these four duties, these are the actions that really bring results.

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