The Lightning Bolt

June 3, 2009

That lightning bolt that struck today was so close that you could feel it in your skin. You could hear it sizzling and crackling in the air. We could have died. It would have been very sudden. That sense of disorientation, why is there this weird sense in the air of what’s happening. And it could have struck us. That would have been it. Make sure you stop and reflect. As the passage says, we’re subject to death. And the Thai translation actually says death is normal. It happens all the time. So the Buddha has you reflect every day. Are you ready to go? When the sun rises, this might be your last sunrise. Are you ready to go? As the sun sets, this might be your last sunset. Something might happen tonight. Are you ready to go? And the answer almost always is no, not yet. So when the answer is not yet, what do you have left to do? This contemplation is not to get you discouraged, but it’s to get you to make sure that you stay meedful, that there’s important work to be done in training the mind. You don’t want to put it off to tomorrow, or next week, or even just the next breath. You’ve got this breath right now. What can you do to train the mind with this breath? What work do you have? What needs to be done? Make that your top priority. As you probably noticed around here, we have a lot of bowing and chants to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha every day. There was a reflection just now on respect for the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. What it comes down to, though, is respect for your mind, respect for your desire for true happiness. After all, that’s how the Buddha ordered his life. He looked at what was important in his life and said, “I’ve got to get my mind trained. If there’s a possibility for true happiness, I want to give my life to that possibility.” Then he tried various ways and ran into some dead ends. But ultimately, he did find that it is possible, through human effort, to find true happiness. He’d been discouraged by other people. These other people tried to discourage him from his quest. They kept saying, “True happiness is impossible.” As our society keeps saying today, “Buy our new sponge mop and you’ll be happy. Don’t worry about true happiness.” Just be interested in the kind of happiness that comes from buying our things or buying the experiences now. There’s this whole economy around the Ford experience or the Yosemite experience. Society is geared to distract us from our desire for true happiness and to teach us disrespect for our desire for true happiness. It’s telling us something, that it’s impossible or that it’s selfish. But when we respect the Buddha, we’re respecting our desire that true happiness is possible and I want to be able to do what I can to find it. And so we listen to those who seem to have found happiness before us and we give their teachings a try. Buddhism is famous for allowing people to question things and to put things to the test. But putting things to the test requires an awful lot of commitment. So we do start with this attitude of respect. Again, the respect is directed not just outside but also inside as well. So, as a JonSuo, I’d like to say, as you sit down here, sit down with an attitude of respect for what you’re doing. You’re doing important work here, delicate work, training the mind. And whether it’s going well or going poorly, that’s not the issue right now. The issue is that you keep at it, that you don’t let yourself get discouraged. And you try to create the right conditions, both inside and out, for focusing on training the mind as your top priority. In the texts, they talk about four factors. One is trying to find a person of integrity, to learn what you can from that person so you don’t have to keep reinventing the Dharma wheel. Every time you sit down, you find a person of integrity and then you listen to that person’s Dharma. It’s not that you believe everything you hear. The third factor is appropriate attention. You subject that Dharma to the right questions. Does this Dharma sound like it’s going to lead to the end of suffering or is it going to get you entangled? It’s all sorts of social responsibilities, things that will distract you from really focusing on the mind. And also, you take that Dharma and you reflect on yourself. What does this Dharma tell me about my own suffering? What does it tell me about the causes of my suffering? This is an important part of the practice, using the Dharma to question yourself. All too often, we want to change the Dharma to suit our preferences, measuring the Dharma against our own ideas. But you have to be willing to measure your own ideas against the Dharma, measure your own practices against the Dharma, so you can see which things that arise in the mind are your friends and which things are your enemies, which things actually help in the practice to put an end to suffering, and which parts of your mind, no matter how much you cherish them, are actually obstacles. And then the fourth factor is, once you see what needs to be done, then you do it. That’s called practicing the Dharma in line with the Dharma. And again, you do what has to be done. You give rise to a sense of disenchantment and dispassion for the things that you’ve been feeding on that actually lead to suffering. And to see if what the Buddha said is true, that there really is a deathless element or a deathless dimension that can be touched in the mind. Well, he says it’s not only touching the mind, he calls it seeing it with the body, touching it with the body. In other words, you sense it with your whole being. You sense it with your whole range of experience. So that’s what we’re after. It’s that possibility. These four factors. Finding someone who’s a person of integrity, which the Buddha defines in one of the texts as someone who doesn’t have the sort of greed, aversion, or delusion that would cause him or her to claim knowledge that he or she didn’t have. You find a person of integrity, you listen to that person’s Dharma, you apply appropriate attention to it. In other words, you try to look at it in terms of the formidable truths and the duties of the formidable truths. And then you look at your own life and say, “Okay, where does my life need to be changed? Which potentials in the mind should I develop and which potentials in the mind should I let go?” There’s that famous saying from the third patriarch, Zen, that the great way is not difficult for those with no preferences. There are lots of different ways of understanding that statement, but the most useful one is that you do what has to be done. If the path requires that you work on concentration, you work on concentration. If it requires that you give up certain things that you like, you say, “Well, I’ll try it.” Try giving them up. See what happens. And at the same time, learn how to talk yourself into wanting to do the practice. This is an important element in right effort. It tends to get overlooked, the factor of desire. For years, when people were translating the Pali Canon, they came across the word “desire” in the definition of right effort, and they said, “This can’t be. After all, desire is bad. It’s got to be something else.” So they translated it as zeal or enthusiasm or something else. But the word actually means desire. You try to generate the desire to do what’s skillful and to abandon what’s not. That means you have to psych yourself out. This is why there are lots of topics for meditation. We take the breath as our home base. That’s the object we keep returning to, because, as the Buddha said, it’s the best one for clearing unskillful states out of the mind, like rain clearing the dust out of the air. But there are times when simply sitting here with the breath is not going to be enough. So you can stop and reflect on the Buddha. What kind of person was the Buddha? He had all that wealth, all that power, and he left it. He went out in the forest, put himself on the line. When he came back, he offered his teachings for free. There were no suggested donations. There were no donatalks. Anyone who came and needed to know the Dhamma, he would teach the Dhamma. He was that kind of person. So we’re following the path that was taught by a person like that. Reflect on the Dhamma. The practice of the Dhamma, as I say, is good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end. It asks you to do things that are honorable, clear-headed, harmless, helpful, both to yourself and to people around you. Again, this path to happiness is very different from most of the paths to happiness that the world has to offer. Some people say, “Well, you have to be willing to cut corners here and to take advantage of other people there, and forget about your values, to do what you can to get ahead.” That’s not the kind of path we have here. It’s a totally upright path, straightforward path, an honorable path. There’s a dignity to following this path that you don’t find in most of the ways people scramble around to find happiness. You reflect on the Dhamma. Reflect on the Sangha. When you think that you’re having difficulties in the practice, go back and read the Therigatha and the Theragatha, stories of the elder nuns, elder monks, and all the difficulties they went through in order to attain awakening. But they were able to do it. Many times they were worse off than you are now, yet they were able to pull themselves together. They can do it. You can, too. You can reflect on your virtue, the times in the past when you’ve done good things that you didn’t have to do. Reflect on your generosity, the times when you were generous and you didn’t have to be generous, either with material things or your time or your knowledge, your forgiveness. These things help inspire a sense of confidence in yourself. Because acts of generosity and acts of virtue are the basis for the path. So you’ve already got some of the basis already there under your belt. You can reflect on death. Again, that lightning bolt. You could feel it in your body. It was taking over. Even before you knew what was happening, the body was reacting to it. Death can come in that way. And you want to be ready to go, so that there are no regrets. There’s nothing you’re hanging on to. So these are all ways of reflecting. They’re all ways of generating desire to focus on the practice. So you find that you can take delight in seeing unskillful qualities slough away and seeing skillful qualities grow, no matter how slowly they may seem to grow. They’re there. You’ve got something in the mind that’s worth treasuring. It’s worth protecting. It’s worth nurturing. So these four qualities—finding a person of integrity, listening to that person’s dharma, applying the questions of appropriate attention, and then practicing the dharma in line with the dharma—these are the factors for stream entry. These are the factors that will take you to the deathless. They call it “reaching a footing” or “attaining a footing”—images of crossing a stream or crossing a river. In the beginning, it’s difficult because you have all kinds of currents coming down the river, and who knows what’s in the river. I was close friends with a family in Thailand one time. Originally, they had lived on a houseboat. The youngest son in the family was a student of mine at the university when I was teaching there. He’d been about a year old, sitting on the edge of the houseboat, and then he’d fallen into the river. So his father jumped into the river to save him. The river was in flood at the time. Apparently, there was a huge tree just under the surface of the river, coming down the river at full speed. It knocked the father in the ribs. He died a day after that. So when they have the image in the Canon of crossing a river, it’s not just a nice, placid river. They’re talking about a big, dangerous river. So there are bound to be all kinds of things knocking into you as you practice, and don’t let yourself get discouraged by them. Unscalable thoughts come up. You’ve got to find ways to sidestep them. If you can’t deal with them directly right now, just allow them to go off to the side. But don’t put yourself right in the line of fire. Whatever the techniques that are required, you try to master them. But eventually you get to the point where you are to the other side, and finally you reach down and you can feel the bottom of the river. You’re close to the shore. We call that coming ashore in the deathless, or gaining a footing in the deathless. That’s the point where you know you’re not going to be swept away by the river. And it’s these very basic things that get you there. Combined with that attitude of respect, this is an important task. You want to have respect for your desire for true happiness, because it is possible. It is a worthwhile goal. And don’t let anybody else, either inside or outside, tell you any different. And even if you don’t get all the way in this lifetime, there’s another chance. So the effort that’s put into the practice is not wasted. Just try to keep that set of values foremost in your mind. After all, the Buddha had a lot of compassion for your desire for true happiness. He took it seriously, and so should you.

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