Accepting Freedom

October 30, 2010

When the Buddha talked about karma, he was very clear on the fact that it was not deterministic. In other words, what you’re doing right now or what you’re experiencing right now is not totally determined by the past. You play a role in shaping things. There is some impact from your past actions. And the Buddha says you should look at all your senses as the result of something you willed—old karma. But what you do with the potentials that come from old karma, that’s something you have a range of choice. And one of the purposes of meditation is to expand that range of choice, to focus in on where you do have the ability to choose, and how to do it skillfully. So in one sense, you’re building up good karma that’s going to continue to have an influence on you. Because the more you notice things now, the more clearly you’re going to be able to make choices in the future. The more you develop your mindfulness, the more you develop your alertness, the more you develop the greater your ability to see what you can do, what you’re shaping, and how well you’re shaping it. So it’s an interplay of past and future actions, all the way down the line. But you want to explore as much as possible the potential for freedom right now, where you can make your choices, what you can do more skillfully. And what you can see with more sensitivity. As we’re practicing the path, it’s both an issue of gradual progress and then sudden insights. The gradual part is the fact that you have to refine your powers of perception, refine your mindfulness, refine your alertness. That’s when you’re dealing with the breath right now. The more sensitive you’re going to be to the breath, and the more sensitive you are to how your focus is having an impact on the breath, how the way you think about the breath or perceive the breath is having an impact on the breath, and how it’s having an impact on the mind, then you build up a momentum of seeing things that are even more subtle. And as for the sudden insight, the possibility of gaining ultimate freedom is there. After all, ultimate freedom is not located at some time on a timeline, that you step out of the timeline. And the possibility is there all the time. But if you don’t have the developed powers of perception, the developed powers of sensitivity, you’re not going to see the possibility there. Things don’t get into the right balance. So it’s a combination of being both sudden and gradual, this path that we’re following. So where does the path lead? In one sense, it leads deeper and deeper into the present moment. Because as long as you’re here, you’ve got the present moment to look into. And even though the details of what’s going on, the experience of having a body, the experience of all the other aggregates, will change. But you’ve always got the present moment to look at. We’re just going deeper and deeper into this present moment. So in one sense we are practicing over time, and in the other sense we’re practicing right in the present. And we’re seeing the impact of both old karma and new karma as they combine. And the potential there is for what the Buddha said is the kind of action that leads beyond action or leads to the end of action. But you can’t short-circuit the process. You’ve got to work with the body you have. You’ve got to work with the mental factors you have right now. And you’ve got to see what’s getting in the way of really seeing things clearly. In some cases, it’s simply the fact that the mind can’t settle down. It slips off into different states of becoming. It’s old habits of wandering around. Jon Swartz’s definition for bhava, or becoming, was the wandering places of the mind. It’s all the different spots it goes. You’ve got little become-ings hanging all over your mind, like that image John Lee has of smells hanging from your nose and sounds hanging from your ears. You’ve got little become-ings hanging like little deflated balloons all over your mind. And you can decide you’re going to go into one of those balloons and inflate it a little bit for a while. But then you’ve got the larger becoming of just being in the present moment. And that’s the one you want to work on, because that’s when we can really watch things clearly. So you learn over time what kind of ways you focus, where you focus on the body, how you work with the breath energy to help keep you from wandering away. I’ve found that focusing on the breath energy in the pituitary area helps to blot out a lot of thinking. Or focusing on the line of the breath that goes down from the throat to the heart. We get really sensitive to that. I find it pretty riveting. But each of us has our own special sensitive spots. And you learn that over time. And you learn them just through trial and error. That’s the gradual part of the path. That’s also why mindfulness is such an important part of the path, because you’re learning lessons as you meditate. There’s one school of thought that says each present moment is utterly unique, and you’re here to just celebrate its uniqueness. That kind of meditation, you can’t learn anything. Because the lesson that you learn today would not apply to the lessons that you would need for tomorrow, other than the idea that everything is unique. But what the Buddha has your hold in mind is the fact that you can notice what causes suffering, what causes stress. And you can also notice what ways of focusing on the breath, what ways of focusing the mind, what other topics of meditation help. And you want to be able to keep those discoveries in mind. Because mindfulness is not just a matter of keeping certain Buddhist teachings in mind, but it’s also remembering your experiences, what worked and what didn’t work. This is why it’s useful at the end of each meditation session to take stock of how well the mind settled down. And when it did seem to settle down, ask yourself, “Okay, where was I focused? How did I get there? How was I able to stay there? What knocked me out?” So you can build up a fund of experience, a fund of knowledge, kind of that gradual part of the path. And then the alertness focuses more on what’s actually happening right now. How does this experience come about? Have you ever sat down to meditate with the same particular set of sensations in the body, sensations in the mind? Then you use your mindfulness to try to remember, “Okay, the last time I had this kind of experience.” Because sometimes you sit down and the mind seems primed and ready to go, and yet for some reason it doesn’t settle down. Can you remember what worked in a similar circumstance in the past? Similarly, if the mind doesn’t seem primed, the body doesn’t seem primed, and yet in the past there were times when you were able to get things to settle down, what happened? What did you do? These are the things you can learn. These are the lessons that create that freedom. And they create a greater sensitivity. So there’s plenty to learn from the past, and there’s plenty to explore in the present moment. And the skill of the meditation is learning how to put them together. And if you can’t remember anything from the past, then you have to put more emphasis on trial and error in the present moment. And even when you can remember things from the past, you have to see, “Well, do those strategies really work right now?” Again, you try. Put things to the test. But keep remembering, you have these ranges of choice. You’re not just stuck with the way things are at the moment. That works both ways. Sometimes things are going really well. You can’t get complacent, because things can change. When things are not going well, remind yourself, “Okay, there is a possibility here. Maybe I can get the mind to settle down. Maybe I can get things more clear.” If you’re feeling drowsy, what can you do to wake yourself up? If you’re feeling agitated, what can you do to calm yourself down? You do have a range of choice. And a large part of the skill in meditation is learning how to explore that range. Make the most of it. If you want to see it as a type of acceptance, you accept the way things are at the moment, but you also accept the fact that you have the ability to change them. And they have the ability to change as well. So when things are going well, you have to accept the fact that you can’t just get complacent. When things are not going well, you accept the fact that it is possible to make them go better. So you’ve got to work.

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