The Heart of the Teaching

March 7, 2012

The tradition of walking around someone three times, keeping your right to that person, goes way back, even before the time of the Buddha. The tradition of making offerings with candles, incense, and flowers goes way back as well. The Buddha called that homage with material things, amisambhuccha. But the best way to pay homage, he said, was homage to the practice. That’s what we’re going to do now. We’re going to sit and meditate. Because you think about all the many, many lifetimes the Buddha went through to become Buddha, to find the path to the end of suffering and to teach it to others. He didn’t do it just for candles and incense and flowers. He did it in the hopes that people would take his teachings and practice them so that they too would reap the results. So this is the kind of homage you wanted. And of course, it’s the homage that gives us the best results, too. Tonight’s the night of Magha Puja, the full moon in the month of Magha. The story goes that in the first year of the Buddha’s teaching career, on the afternoon of this day, 1,250 of his disciples, all of whom had attained full awakening, came without any previous invitation to see him. So before he set them out to teach others, he taught a summary of his teachings, called the Avadhi Patimokkha. One of the important passages in that summary is not doing any evil, bringing what’s skillful to consummation, and cleansing the mind so that it’s pure. These three principles are sometimes called the heart of the Buddha’s teachings. And it’s good to reflect on them, because they all play an important role in training the mind. Not doing any evil means anything at all that we know would be unskillful. We try to avoid it. We exercise restraint. This principle of restraint is very important. Otherwise, anything that pops in your mind comes out your mouth, it comes out in your activities. You’re not protected from your unskillful qualities. Other people are not protected. So at the very least, you don’t want them to come out in your words and your deeds. This is one of the reasons why we take the precepts. No killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no intoxicants. These are ways of training the mind. In which we avoid harm to others and avoid harm to ourselves, because this is the way we protect ourselves. You hear stories about people trying to protect themselves with guns, but that’s no protection at all. It’s dealing with fear in an unskillful way. The skillful thing to fear is your own unskillful behavior. It’s better to die never having killed anyone than it is to die having killed somebody. And we’re going to die anyhow. But it’s best to die with a clean record. And as the Buddha said, if you haven’t done anything harmful, harm cannot come to you. He gives the analogy of a hand. If your hand has no wounds, then you can pick up poison and there’ll be nothing to save you from the wound. But if there is a wound, you can’t pick up poison. It’s going to kill you. So when we avoid harmful behavior, it’s like keeping our hands free of wounds. We protect ourselves, we protect others, in the most skillful way possible. And this ability to keep your activities in check will help you to avoid harm. It turns into a training for the mind. You’ll learn how to keep your mind in check as well. As for doing what is skillful, trying to bring it to its culmination, anything that would be skillful, you try to nourish in your activities. This is one of the reasons why we’re generous. We know that it’s good for ourselves, good for others, and develops all kinds of good qualities. Generosity here means not only generosity with material things, but generosity with our time, with our energy, with our knowledge, with our forgiveness. Anyway, we feel moved to help others. It’s training in freedom, the realization that even though we may have the desire to hold on to something and keep it for ourselves, we don’t have to be a slave to that desire. We can share. We see that our own happiness comes from helping the happiness of others. This too is training for the mind. It gives you a lesson that happiness comes not from taking, but from giving. And the willingness to give of your time, the willingness to give of your energy, is an important motivation. It’s an important gift to ourselves and to others. It creates the right state of mind. We’re willing to put up with the difficulties of, say, sitting here and meditating. When the mind doesn’t settle down, we realize that it’s not because there’s something wrong with this practice. It’s simply that we haven’t given enough, in this case of our energy, of our time, of our powers of observation. It’s in these ways that the practice of generosity and the practice of virtue really are part of training the mind. When the mind settles down, on the one hand, you think of the goodness you’ve done and the harm you’ve avoided. It puts the mind in a much better mood, and you’ve learned lessons. Learning how to refrain from things that you may want to do but you know are unskillful, and doing things you may not want to do but you know are going to be skillful, is very useful training in meditation, because a lot of the meditation is going to involve that. The mind may want to think about today or think about tomorrow or all kinds of things, but you say, “No, this is not the time for that.” And it may not be in the mood to settle down right now, but you remind yourself, “This really is important. This is how you develop the good qualities of mind.” Being mindful, being alert, being ardent in the practice. For instance, you decide to stay with a breath. How are you going to stay with a breath? It requires some ingenuity. One way is to try to make the breath really comfortable. Experiment to see how the breathing feels right now, where you notice it. Those sensations of in-breath and out-breath, are they comfortable or are they forced? Can you allow the breath to come in in a way that feels nourishing, that doesn’t feel constricted, that doesn’t feel tight? That actually does give you energy. You find that this accomplishes two things. On the one hand, it makes being with the breath a pleasant thing. It also makes it an interesting thing. It feels good to be with the breath, and you find that you can learn about the energy in the body and learn how to use it in a way that’s good for the body, soothing for the mind. As the mind begins to settle down with the breath, you have a magnet here to pull you into the present moment, because there will be parts of the mind that are not on board. They have other agendas. And all too often it seems like the parts of the mind that want to wander away, those are the ones with the tricks by which you can deceive yourself, saying, “How about going over there?” And then they disappear for a bit. They come back a bit later. “How about going over there?” And after a while it seems like the most natural thing to do, to go over there. But each time these thoughts come up, you can remind yourself, “No, that’s not what we’re here for.” You’ve got to give the skillful members of your committee some tricks as well. So this is one of the reasons why we use the breath, so that staying in the present moment does feel good. You give yourself a good foundation right here so you can watch the mind as it’s ready to move. And you can decide whether its movements are skillful or not. This is where we move into the third principle, that of cleansing the mind so that it’s pure. In other words, you can step back from your thoughts and realize you don’t have to be a slave to them, just as you don’t have to be a slave to your selfishness. You don’t have to be a slave to your greed, aversion, and delusion. You take advantage of some of that freedom you’ve learned from the practice of generosity. So you’re going to remind yourself that there is a part of the mind that flourishes when it’s not chasing after things that it’s greedy for, getting worked up about things that it’s angry about. This is a well-being that can begin to blossom here in the present moment. This is how we begin to purify the mind. Then as we gain greater insight into the various ways that the mind can be made to settle down and the various ways in which it can slip off, you try to get faster and faster at catching the thoughts. Even before they slip off, it’s possible to sense when they’re about to go. This is an important level of insight, because it gives you a lot. You have more control over the mind. So you don’t have to wake up someplace out in the middle of the desert and say, “How did I get out here?” You know beforehand. And you begin to see the stages of how the mind concocts a thought and how it conspires to pull you away. The more quickly you catch this, the more basic the stages you find. This is one of the ways in which we cleanse the mind. We learn to see its unskillful tendencies as that and see them as undesirable. You begin to see the connection that when the mind allows greed, aversion, delusion, lust, hatred, fear, whatever, to take over. It suffers right away, and then it’s going to suffer over the long term. On the other hand, you have a state of concentration that you can compare with those tendencies of the mind. You see, this really is a much better place to stay right now and in terms of its rewards for the future. This way you change the balance of power in the mind. So instead of allowing the mind to be overcome by qualities of greed, aversion, and delusion, more skillful qualities take over. Conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment—these things can become dominant within the mind. And so the defilements of greed, aversion, and delusion, you begin to recognize these really do defile the mind. But you realize the stain of these defilements is not permanent. If you drop them, the stain is gone. The mind can become luminous as you train it. These are some of the basic principles in the practice. The principles the Buddha taught to his students to go out and teach people 2,600 years ago. And they still work today. As we sit here practicing, we’re carrying on their work. Because the Buddha didn’t teach these things just to have something to say, or because they sounded nice. He taught them because they really work. He taught them because he wanted people to take them and put them to use. And so we’re carrying out his very compassionate intentions right now as we practice. And not only as we sit here with our eyes closed, but also as we go out into the world trying to avoid any kind of unskillful behavior, trying to bring skillfulness to its fulfillment, so we can taste the true happiness of a clean, pure, bright mind. That’s what the Buddha wanted for us. And if we have any sense, that’s what we should want for ourselves.

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