Lessons from Right Action

September 15, 2012

Right action is one of the factors of the path we don’t normally think about while we’re meditating. Because we’re sitting here still. You’re not killing anything, you’re not stealing anything, you’re not having illicit sex with anybody. So it doesn’t seem all that relevant. But it’s good to think about. One of the obvious reasons, of course, is that it builds on the right resolve—the resolve for renunciation, the resolve for non-ill will, the resolve for non-harmfulness, and the actions that are refrained from in right action. And by living in line with that factor of the path, you’re creating a much better environment for the meditation. You’re not creating bad karma with others that they’re going to want to retaliate. You’re not giving in to really gross forms of greed, aversion, and delusion. And you’re learning that you do have some control over your life. All too often we think that whatever we do is pushed on us by other people, and our life is hemmed in by other people’s ideas and other people’s wants—forces beyond our control, bigger than just individual people around us. But it’s good to notice that if you refrain from these things, you do create a different life around you. But the reflection can go deeper than that, because after all, when you are moving your body around in right or wrong action, it’s not just a matter of the body. Right action deals with intentional actions. Where do the intentions come from? They come from the mind. So what qualities of mind are fostered by right action? It’s not giving in to really gross expressions of greed, aversion, and delusion. That’s some training for the mind. It alerts you that these qualities are really unskillful. And you can look further in. In what ways are you sitting here meditating that greed, aversion, and delusion come in and invade your concentration? There’s a set of analogies. The resolve not to kill, he says. When you’re meditating, when you’re working in your concentration, you resolve not to kill your concentration. Whatever thoughts that would come in that would trample over the stillness of your mind, you have to let them go. You realize that the life of your concentration is really important. That principle of respect for concentration is something we all have to learn. Respect for those little moments of concentration in the beginning, when the mind settles down with a breath a little bit and then leaves, and then you bring it back. They really are worth pursuing. They really are worth protecting. Because after all, you begin to connect them, and that’s how they take on life. They develop a momentum. They develop a way of growing organically when they’re connected. So, one, don’t kill your concentration. Two, don’t steal the affairs of other people to think about right now. As Ajaan Lee says, when you’re thinking about other people’s bad points, have you asked their permission? Are they happy to let you have their bad points so you can talk about it, think about it? Probably not. In other words, right now it’s none of your business what other people have done or are doing, because you realize that the main cause of suffering right now and the main cause of stress in your life is what you’re doing, the way you think about things and the way you act, the way you speak, but above all, the way you think about things. So if you’re going to be thinking about something, don’t think about other people right now. Think about what you’re doing right here, right now. And then finally, the resolve not to engage in illicit sex. That, of course, refers to not getting involved in thoughts of sensuality right now. Sensual objects, sensual narratives… As the Buddha pointed out, the real problem in sensuality is not so much the objects, it’s your fascination with the ways you can think about them. There’s a passage in Kant where he says that the thing about beautiful objects, what’s beautiful about them, is that your mind likes to play with them. And it enjoys playing with the objects. It can contemplate them from this side, contemplate them from that side. That’s basically what the Buddha’s talking about. He said we love to contemplate these things. We can think about them for many hours. You can plan a meal. The meal itself may take only half an hour, even less than half an hour to eat, but you can plan it for hours, days, and really enjoy playing around with the ideas. If you’re going to fix this food, you’re going to fix that food. If people are going to like it this way, you’re going to like it that way. If you’re going to represent it, the mind can go on and on and on. And so as you’re sitting here meditating, you’ve got to say, “No, we’re not going to go there. If we’re going to find pleasure, we’re going to find it here with the breath.” This is why the Buddha encourages you to settle in and enjoy and indulge in the pleasure that comes from this concentration. Because without a sense of well-being, without a sense of refreshment, without a sense of the concentration, you’re going to get pulled back to your sensual fantasies. So the same principle applies here. Learn to enjoy thinking about the breath, all the various ways you can play with the breath—in the head, in the body, around the heart area—wherever you find it’s really interesting to notice how the breath has an impact on the circulation in the different parts of the body, and how you can start distinguishing which part is the circulation. And one of the first things you’ve got to learn is how to focus on that part of the body and not constrict the circulation while you stay focused. When you’re starved of nourishment, the circulation hasn’t been that good. It’s because of the breath that you can move the blood in that way. But you have to notice there’s a distinction between the blood and the breath. When the blood moves up against the walls of the blood vessels, there’s going to be pressure. The breath, however, doesn’t have pressure. It’s a moving energy, totally pressure-free. Learn to examine that. Let your mind play around with that possibility and see what you can discover. So the pleasure you gain from meditation is not just the pleasure of comfortable breathing, but the fascination that comes with learning about these different elements in the body, these different properties in the body, and what you can do with them. John Lee invented a whole method of meditation, just working with the breath energy after you’ve had a heart attack. Playing around, exploring. In this case, it wasn’t just playing around. It was serious playing around. But still, there was an element of exploring and experimentation, and the enjoyment of discovering something new that could really engage the mind. So these are some of the lessons you can learn about concentration as you look at the Buddhist teachings on right action. And it goes further than that. You can learn one very important lesson about discernment. If you look at those three forms of wrong action, you’ll see that you’re trying to avoid taking life, taking people’s belongings without their permission, having sex with people who already have someone else laying claim to them—either the parents of a minor or another adult, or when you have somebody who lays claim on you. What you’re doing is taking, taking, taking things that don’t really belong to you. Other people’s lives don’t belong to you. They’re not under your power. I mean, you could harm them, but you weren’t the one who created the life to begin with. Even with your children, you didn’t create their lives. You just gave them the opportunity to take birth. So their lives are not your lives to take. Other people’s things are not your things to take. People with whom you might have illicit sex are not really yours to take. This is all a lesson in the suffering that comes from taking things that are not really yours. You can take this deeper into the mind, and you realize it’s a teaching on not-self. We keep laying claim to things. This body is yours, you think. Where does it come from? It comes from food. Where does the food come from? Some of it’s plants, and some of it’s the flesh of animals, which is not really yours to begin with. All the things that we lay claim to in nature, both in the body and in the mind, the act of laying claim is going to cause stress and suffering. So it’s an important lesson. If you see yourself laying claim to something that’s not really you or yours, it’s best to let it go. After all, the teachings end up with release that comes through letting go, release that comes through relinquishment, like the last stage in breath meditation. After you’ve gone through contemplating inconstancy, contemplating dispassion, contemplating cessation, you think that would be the end of it, cessation. But there goes one more step, relinquishment. You give up everything, even the path. You’ve been using the various elements of the path all along. But there comes a point where they’ve done their work, just like tools. You’ve used the tools to build something? Okay, then you let the tools go. Or you’ve used the tools to chip away at an obstacle? Okay, the obstacle is gone. You put down the tools. That’s a total letting go. And then you realize these things weren’t really yours to begin with. They just go back to nature. So these are some of the lessons you can learn. And by thinking about these various actions that the Buddha had you avoid as part of right action, it just reaffirms that basic principle that the teachings on the precepts and the teachings on concentration and the teachings on discernment are all part of one piece. There’s a statement from the Buddha that the whole path, once you’ve completed the path, you look back and you realize it was one single thing all the way through. So learn to see these many dimensions because they nourish your path, they nourish your practice. It goes beyond just what the words say. And you see that it has ramifications in all different areas of the mind. (bell chimes)

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