Pay Attention

September 29, 2012

John Lee was once criticized for not teaching enough about nirvana and spending his time talking about things that were not quite as exalted. And as he told the critic, “I’d like to, but look, if I did, I’d be crazy.” You have to teach where people are. So sometimes you have to talk about really mundane things. This evening I walked up to the sala and someone had left the light on in the men’s room. Someone used the phone this evening while it was charging. Then he put it back and they didn’t put it back on the charger, so it almost ran out. There’s a long list of things I could talk about. People are not paying attention. People are not looking around them. Part of being a meditator is that nothing is too small for attention—the cleanup after the meal, all kinds of areas. We should be paying more attention. Because if those things are too unimportant to deal with, what about the little things in your mind? Years back we were having a discussion with the precepts up at Laguna and we got into the topic of ants. We were talking about ants for quite a while. And someone made a snarky comment about how profound the discussion was. And I said, “Look, if you can’t make time for ants…” Give them some consideration. How are you going to deal with the little tiny defilements as they start in the mind? Because they don’t stay little. They get bigger. And the bigger they get, it’s not the case that the more obvious they are, the easier they are to deal with. The bigger they are, the more obvious, the more entrenched they become. It takes a long time to dig them out. You want to catch these things when they’re small. So be willing to look into the little things. There are little fires or little snakes, the Buddha has a comment about, things you can’t be complacent about. A little fire is one. A little snake is another. And little snakes have no sense of how to hold back their venom, so when they bite, they give all their venom to the bite. Little fires can turn into big ones. A little bit of greed, a little bit of anger, a little bit of delusion, a little bit of lust, a little bit of jealousy. These things can grow and grow and grow. And if you’re not on top of them, they can make your meditation all fall apart. It’s like a car. When the bolt gets loose, one nut gets loose and things start to get shaken up a little bit, and that loosens up the other nuts and the other bolts, and after a while the whole thing just collapses. This is why the principle of jitta, or intent, is so important in the practice. You want to pay careful attention to what you’re doing. Give it your whole attention. Be single-minded in your practice. This is no time to multitask. We’re here to focus on the breath, to look after our minds. And no little movement of the mind is too small to pay attention to. You want to be able to see these movements as they’re about to happen. Because the mind does have its little signals that it’s about ready to change its frame of reference from being right here with the breath to being off someplace else. It’s floating around in a little bubble. So it’s beginning to move in that direction. It hasn’t really left the breath yet, but it’s about to. You want to be able to sense that. And paying careful attention like this also helps get over the problem of boredom. A lot of people say they meditate and they don’t see anything’s happening in their meditation and they get bored. Well, they’re not paying careful enough attention. Minds of things are happening in the mind all the time. If you don’t pay attention, you’re missing out on a lot. This is why the path is a gradual one. Your sensitivity has to develop and keep on developing. Everyone likes to read about the sudden awakening. It’s like that image on the continental shelf of India. It goes out gradually and then there’s a sudden drop. And everyone wants the sudden drop without realizing that without the gradual slope you’re not going to get there. And the opening to the deathless is, in principle, always available. But you’re not sensitive enough to it, and it’s a lot more subtle than your defilements. So as you’re with the breath, try to be sensitive to the least little movements of the mind. Secure the mind with the breath if you find that it’s getting wobbly. Give yourself some good pep talks if you need to give more energy to your intentness. The Buddha gives all kinds of ideas about how you can get yourself more focused on the practice. Your sense of heedfulness. Your sense of compassion. If you’re practicing well, then the people who are supporting you are going to benefit even more. Use your sense of humor. There’s a really nice passage where the Buddha’s talking about the various grounds for laziness and the grounds for being energetic. And the humor comes in the fact that the outside conditions are all the same. You’ve been sick, you’ve just recovered, and you’re still not quite well. And he uses that as an excuse to say, “Well, I need to rest because I’m not quite well yet.” And the other one says, “Here, I’ve been sick and I’ve gotten a lot better. I’m able to practice. This disease could relapse. Why don’t I practice while I’ve got the chance?” And so you realize that all the excuses you give yourself for having to rest are all just excuses for having to take it easy for a day or so. They often have very little to do with actual objective circumstances and more to do with your own attitude. So when you catch yourself trying to find that easy way out, remember to laugh at yourself. That’s often one of the most effective ways of dealing with a defilement. There you go again. Develop a healthy sense of shame. Here you are practicing. People are supporting you. What do you have to show for it? Have a sense of pride. The shame here is the healthy sense of shame that gets paired with pride. We’re working on a skill here. It’s a very refined skill. Tom Brown, he’s been admiring the Leecheevi princes as they practice archery. Back in those days, they weren’t dealing with just little bows and arrows, but huge bows. It took a lot of strength and a lot of finesse to get those arrows to go right where you wanted them to go. And he was really impressed. He comes back and he mentions this to the Buddha. And the Buddha says, “Wait a minute. Which do you think is harder to pierce? A straw target or your ignorance?” Of course, the monastery admits that it’s the vulnerable truths that are a lot more difficult. We’re working on a really refined skill here. Take pride in that fact and take pride in your workmanship. These are just a few of the ways the Buddha recommends to get you more focused on what you’re doing. Because as with any craftsman, you want to look after the little things. And so when you look after the little problems in the mind, one, you’re catching them before they become big problems. And secondly, you’re developing your powers of sensitivity, because the little good things in the mind are often a lot more subtle than the little bad things. So it’s not a waste of time to remember to turn off the lights in the bathroom or to keep the place where we wash our bowls neat, to put things away, to make sure you don’t leave your robes out in the sun all day long. We’ve got this hot furnace of a sun here. Your robes will last longer. Don’t leave plastic things out in the sun. They’re going to get brittle. Before I left for Washington, I had those plastic dustbins stowed away. I had the brooms stowed away out of the sun. I come back, they’re all back in the sun. I mean, that’s not necessary. If you look after the little things, it’s part of training the mind. It’s the same mind that’s sitting here meditating. The mind we’re trying to train.

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