Primitive Practice

August 9, 2013

There was an anthropologist who was studying the culture of the Eskimos in central Alaska. I think they were Eskimos, I’m not sure. The Native Americans in central Alaska. And he was asking them about their religious beliefs. And one of the people who was interviewing after all said, “Look, it’s not that we believe, it’s that we fear.” That’s what the religion was all about. It was about fear. Now, you might regard that as something primitive or something insightful. And maybe it’s actually both. Maybe it’s good to be primitive. There was a trailer to a video I saw today in which someone was talking about the forest tradition and commenting on how primitive it was. He meant it as an insult, of course, but it doesn’t have to be taken as an insult. Being primitive keeps you in touch with really basic issues. And Buddhism is based on fear. Not irrational fear, but just the realization that the things you could be doing to revive your happiness may actually lead to suffering. That’s a very valid fear. There’s a lot in the world that’s not under your control, but there are some that are. You take the things that are under your control and you use them for your own pain and suffering. That’s something to be really afraid of. And you want to stay in touch with that basic fact, that basic fear, because that directs everything that we do. And because it’s so basic, we have basic things to focus on. It’s part of the teaching. We focus on the breath. That’s about as basic as you can get. Coming in, breath going out. And yet the Buddha found something really valuable right here. Mahajan Phuong called the grass at the mouth of the cattle pen. The cattle are released from the cattle pen and they immediately go running out to the pasture to look for grass. And sometimes there’s grass growing right there at the post, right next to the gate. The easiest grass to get. You don’t want to take it. You want to go out for something further. So think about that as you’re practicing. We’re keeping, as they say, close to the ground, close to the grass. When you’re down on this level, you see things a lot more clearly than if you’re way up high. When you’re way up high in an airplane, everything is a haze. And even satellites that can see all kinds of things. There’s a lot that they miss because they’re looking down on things. We look at things at eye level. And what have we got here? We had that chant just now in the thirty-two parts of the body. I don’t know any other religion that has a chant like that. To remind you, there’s a lot of lessons to be learned by looking at your relationship to your body. It’s a great antidote for pride. It’s a great antidote for lust. It’s a great antidote for anything that you want to do simply to provide for the body. You want to keep remembering this doesn’t last all that long and it’s not all that nice when you’ve got it. It requires all kinds of care. And any pride that you would have based on your body, the color of the skin or the way you look, it’s really foolish. If you’re looking at the body carefully, there’s really nothing much there. We have a lot, a lot of delusion around that. So it’s good to focus on the things that are right at hand, that catch you up. I like the chant that we also chanted just now on aging, illness, and death. They’re obvious facts. We don’t have to be alive all that long to realize that someday we’re going to grow old, we’re going to get sick, we’re going to die, we’re going to be separated from all the things that we love. And yet we live as if we didn’t know those things. That’s major delusion right there. But we do have our actions. That’s the fifth contemplation. This is where we can make a difference. This is what the Buddha taught, heedfulness, which is basically how you apply that fear of suffering to a positive end, realizing that your actions can make a difference. So be very careful about how you act. We have the precepts that keep pulling our attention to our thoughts, words, and deeds, especially to our intentions, right here, right now. That’s about the closest thing you can get. It’s even closer than your breath. Yet again, we miss them. Many times you ask someone, “Why did you do that?” They have to stop and search for a while. Yet here it is, the thing that’s closest to you, closest at hand. As your practice gets more and more sophisticated, you realize that it gets further and further away from what might be called the primitive issues, the basic issues. But those are the ones that really do make a difference. And this is one of the reasons why the Buddhist teachings are accessible to everybody, no matter what the education level they have. You look at the history of the forest tradition. These are the people who stayed out in the forest and really took the Buddha’s words seriously. That’s supposed to the most important thing. There were many more sophisticated monks in Bangkok who had come up with all their special theories and finally got to the point where they decided it was impossible to gain nirvana. It took people who were living close to the grass, close to the earth, to say, “Well, maybe it is possible.” Maybe simply by looking at your actions, looking at the quality of your mind, you really can make a difference. Look for the subtle things, the little things that are coming here, going there. Where are they coming from? Where are they going? This is where we practice concentration. Again, there are a lot of teachings that say you can go beyond concentration. Concentration is a lowly practice. What you want to do is insight. Well, where are you going to find the insight unless you look very carefully at trying to settle down? And every little thing that comes up in the mind that would disturb your concentration, that’s something you’ve got to deal with. You can’t just brush it aside. Pretend that it’s not happening. There are times when all you have to do is just notice it’s there and then drop it. But you do have to notice that it’s there. You can’t pretend that it’s not. If you pretend that it’s not, it’s going to be like that vine that comes creeping up around you and finally strangles you. So keep focused on the things that are closest at hand and that primitive motivation, the fear of causing harm. Everything in the practice comes from that. As the Buddha said, all skillful qualities grow out of heedfulness. This is why we have to be mindful. And it’s by sticking with the little things that are close to hand that we can handle any situation. As things get more sophisticated, they get harder and harder to adjust. There’s that strange story they tell about the war games that were playing before the Gulf War. They had assigned one general to play the side of the Iraqis, and they very quickly got rid of the telecommunications and all the other sophisticated things that they thought would offer any resistance to an American victory. Whereas the general on the other side had figured out that what they had to do was keep things close to the ground. So they used messengers that went by motorcycle. They used prayer calls from the mosques. And in the first round of the war game, the Iraqis won, because they stuck close to the ground. So keep things simple. Keep things basic and primitive. And you cut through a lot of bull, basically. It’s all the lies that your mind tells to yourself, all the lies that society is telling you. You can look right at them and see right through them, because you stay close to the ground, focused on the big issue. It’s funny, you focus on the little things, but it’s in connection with the big issues. How is the mind causing self-suffering, and how can it be put to an end? So it’s not a case of focusing on the trees and missing the forest. You’re at a point where you see the trees, and you see the forest. Everything’s in the right proportion. That’s the advantage of our primitive practice.

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