The Treasure Hunt

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Meditation is not a matter of trying to clone awakening. It’s more like a treasure hunt. The Buddha gives you instructions saying that there’s something really valuable here. It’s like saying there’s a large chunk of gold in the forest and you’ve got to go out and find it. You’re not going out, you’re coming in. And he gives you some idea of where to look and also tells you how to test for gold. So when you run across fool’s gold, you’ll be able to recognize it as fool’s gold. Or if you come across other things, you find flowers that seem really nice, the Buddha reminds you, “Okay, the flowers are nice, but they’re going to wither, but the gold doesn’t wither. The gold doesn’t change.” What this means is that when you meditate, you don’t just follow instructions. You have to be observant. To change the analogy a bit, it’s like looking for morals in the forest. You can walk right past a whole patch of them and not see them if you don’t have your eyes trained. So if you just follow the instructions, you’re just walking around. But to train your eyes, you need to learn how to be observant about what you’re doing and pay very close attention. This quality in Pali is called citta, or intentness. So when you do something, you look very carefully, one, at what you’re doing, and two, at what the results are. So you can see connections, and you see what follows on what. All too often, people report that something interesting happened in their meditation, but then the question is, “Well, what happened right before that?” They can’t say. Or, “What happened right after?” They didn’t notice. As Ajaan Lee says, that’s not really discernment, because you see either a cause but without the effect, or you see the effect without the cause. And we’re trying to see cause and effect here. That’s what the Four Noble Truths are all about. They say seeing things in terms of stress and the cause of stress. We’re trying to see the connection. What is it about craving that causes stress? And why is that the stress that weighs down the mind? There are lots of other stresses in the world, but if they’re not connected with craving and clinging, they don’t have an impact on the mind. It’s the craving and clinging that bring them in and burden the mind. And the only way to see cause and effect is to watch very carefully. Ajaan Lee has a nice image. He says, “When we walk on the path, it’s not a matter of just walking in one direction and arriving, that’s it. We have to walk back and forth many, many times.” That’s in a route that you follow every day, every day. A lot of people get so they just pay no attention. They drive past things and don’t see anything at all, because they assume, “Well, I’ve seen this before.” They just want to get past it. That way you never see anything. What you want to look for is what’s different about today. And then the next time you go, “What’s different about today?” you go backwards. What do you see from the other side? In other words, you learn how to look both forward and backward. When you come out of a good phase in the meditation, ask yourself again, “Can you remember what you were doing before you got in?” When insight comes up, do you notice to watch what happens right after the insight? If you simply pat yourself on the back, “Oh, that’s a great insight. You’ve missed an important thing.” You can see, “What does this insight actually do for the mind? Is it really helpful? What does it unburden the mind of? If it’s a really good insight, there’s going to be a sense of a burden being taken off.” So you have to notice carefully. And these things aren’t in the instructions as to how you notice, where you’re going to look, what you’re going to see. There are some tests. There are some instructions. The instructions say, “Okay, look here, look here.” But when you look there, sometimes you have to look off to the left, off to the right a little bit. Ask for the standards for judging what you’ve got. That’s what the teachings on the Three Characteristics are all about. If something comes up in the meditation, if you know that it’s a distraction, you’ve got to do what you can to watch. Ween the mind off that distraction. So that’s when you try to notice that it’s inconstant or it’s stressful. It’s not self. Anything that helps you see that this is really not worth getting involved in. As for any attainments you may make as you practice and the mind settles in and seems especially calm or especially light, spacious, the first instruction is to try to maintain the path. Notice what it is that pulls you away. But if you get so that it doesn’t seem like anything is pulling you away, then you watch again and again and again to become really familiar with it. Then you pull out those three characteristics again. See, is there anything inconstant in here? If it is, it’s not the goal. It may be part of the path. But as long as you don’t mistake it for the goal, you’re safe. It could be a little rise or fall in the level of stress. And the question is, is this really worth hanging on to? Is this really worth identifying with? Is there something better? So use these teachings to sharpen your standards of judgment so that when you’re observing, you’ll see clearly what’s going on. And you also are learning how to look precisely where the problem is. It’s like the training they give to people who are learning Chinese medicine. When they teach you how to feel pulses, they have to give you a vocabulary so you can sort out all the different ways the pulse might feel. If you don’t have the vocabulary, you may be sensing these things, but you don’t really see the distinctions among them. Once you’ve got a vocabulary and you begin to test it again and again, you begin to get a sense, “Okay, this is what they’re talking about when they say the pulse is slippery, or this is what they’re talking about when they say the pulse is weak or strong.” In the same way, the Buddha gives you a vocabulary for testing. Anything that comes up in the mind, is this worth holding on to? Is this worth developing? Or is this something you want to abandon? He gives you the vocabulary, but you don’t want to stop with the vocabulary. I was talking a while back to people who were doing a mindfulness practice where they were taught to divide things up very, very precisely—very minute little phenomena. Just watching them come and go, come and go, come and go. And then the question I asked them was, “What do you do with them once you see them?” And there was no answer. As far as they were concerned, simply watching things in these terms of arising and passing away, that’s all you had to do. Well, there is that aspect of the path, but the path includes a lot more. There are things we have to develop. That’s when the Buddha explained the four noble truths. Each of them has a duty. The duty to comprehend the stress, which means to see clearly what is it about the stress that you like. We ordinarily don’t think that we like stress, but why do we keep indulging in craving and clinging all the time? There’s some appeal, some allure, some place. You’ve got to see that and then look at it until you can realize, “Well, this is really not worth holding on to, not worth pursuing.” Then when you can discover the cause of it, what happens together with the stress? When you see that, that’s what you can abandon. You do this by developing the factors of the path so that when a moment of concentration comes up, you don’t just watch it come and go and try to develop dispassion for it. You actually try to develop it, see if you can continue it for another moment and another moment and another moment, keep it going, going, going. That’s in the instructions for Right Effort that we were chanting just now. You try to bring it to the culmination of its development. So the Buddha gives you the vocabulary, but it’s up to you to learn how to use that vocabulary to look at what’s actually happening in your mind so that you can know what to do. So meditation doesn’t succeed simply by following instructions. You follow the instructions, but you also have to learn how to use your own powers of observation so you can see clearly what’s happening, what’s connected to what, what’s worth pursuing, what’s not worth pursuing. These are the sorts of things that you can do. No teacher can tell you. They can point to the idea or point to the concept that you might want to look into this issue. But the discernment that’s actually going to see through things and cut through your attachments, that’s something you have to develop from your own powers of observation. So when you walk down the path that the Buddha described, you learn how to look a little bit left, a little bit right. Turn around, look at where you’ve been, get to know it back and forth, back and forth. And that treasure that you’re looking for, someday you’ll find it right there, right in the middle of the path.

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