Expectations for the Future

November 2, 2016

When we meditate, the emphasis is on staying in the present moment. Because it’s so hard to stay here, the mind keeps slipping off into the past, into the future. And if it doesn’t learn how to watch itself in the present moment, it’s not going to see what it’s doing. It’s not going to see how it shapes its experience and how If it’s done under ignorance, that shaping is going to lead to suffering. But this doesn’t mean that the past and the future don’t have their uses. And the meditation makes reference both to the past and to the future. The past in the sense of our mindfulness, remembering what lessons we’ve learned from our past meditations, or lessons we’ve learned from life in general, that make us want to meditate to the future. If you’re feeling a little down, think of things in the past you’ve done that were good, as a way of lifting your spirits. If your mind is getting careless, think of some of the suffering you’ve had in the past and how you don’t want to repeat that suffering. All this is by way of motivating you to practice. But our motivation also makes reference to the future. We want a happiness that’s lasting. In fact, all of our experience is an active process of looking for happiness. As the Buddha said, there are potentials that come in from our past karma, but they get actualized into aggregates by our fabrication in the present moment. And why do we fabricate things into aggregates? Because we find that there’s pleasure in them. Certain ways of thinking and certain ways of perceiving the world, certain feelings, certain physical experiences, all of these have their pleasures. If it weren’t for these pleasures, we wouldn’t cling. If it weren’t for these pleasures, we wouldn’t suffer. Now, the Buddha is not telling us not to look for pleasure and not to look for happiness. The word sukha has many meanings. It’s interesting that it’s one of the most important words in the Buddha’s vocabulary, but he never defines it. Dukkha, suffering, is also not defined. Citta, the mind, is also not defined. We’re here training the mind to put an end to suffering and to find true happiness. And the only words that are really clearly defined there are the words that have to do with the training. But the Buddha is not telling us that we’re trying to train the mind not to want happiness. Sometimes you hear this, that it’s all about just learning to give up on the idea of happiness and being okay with the fact that nothing’s going to be satisfactory. That’s not the Buddha’s teaching. That’s somebody else’s. His teaching is that you want to take your desire for happiness seriously. In other words, you want to look for the desire to put in an effort that gives a happiness that lasts, that’s not going to change on you. And so we do have a future motivation here. We’re looking for that goal, for happiness that’s not going to cause any harm, because that’s one of the attributes of a lasting happiness. If it caused harm to yourself or others, you wouldn’t want it, and they wouldn’t want it either. That happiness wouldn’t last. So what the Buddha’s telling you instead is to look very carefully at how you shape your experience and make sure that you’re shaping it in the right direction. This is why right resolve falls immediately on right view. Because it’s through our resolve, and this has to do with our expectations and our anticipations, our goals, our motivation. All these things have to do with getting ourselves to act and looking at the worlds we’re planning, how we want to shape things in the future. If the present moment were the only issue, you could find whatever makes you have some pleasure in the present, and that would be the end of the matter. But the fact is, it’s not, because things don’t end with pleasure. We take pleasure as our goal, we take happiness as our goal. There’s the karma of looking for that pleasure and then trying to hold onto it. And that’s what lasts. And that karma can either be good or bad, because there are times when we can do bad things and we get some pleasure out of them. But then the payback is going to come down the line. You’ve got to watch out for that. There are many things that we like doing in the present moment, but you also have to figure out what the long-term consequences are going to be, because that’s the beginning of wisdom. He’s looking for happiness that’s long-term, as opposed to just right here and now. So to that extent, you do have to plan for the future. You have to have expectations for the future. But make sure that your expectations, the things you want out of the future, are things that are going to be conducive to general happiness, genuine happiness—general in the sense of not harming anybody, genuine in the sense of lasting. So it’s not the case that meditators don’t have goals and they just hang out in the present moment. They have to have goals. But they have to be very clear about their goals, because there are so many different goals we have in life, so many different desires. And they tend to point in all kinds of different directions, and they pull at each other. And if you have too many desires firing off in different directions, you end up not attaining any of them. You have to decide what’s worth the effort. What good can I do? Both for myself and for other beings, in my search for happiness. And once you’ve found some of this really worthwhile, hold on to it. That’s the quality of truthfulness on the path. Truth isn’t just a quality of language or statements. Truth is a quality of the character. If you know something is really good, genuinely good, don’t be a traitor to that realization. Be true to it. And allow your imagination for what is possible to be expansive. In other words, don’t just tell yourself, “Well, I’m only capable of so much, so I’m just going to do that much.” That’s realistic in one way, but it’s often selling yourself short. I had a time with a Jon Fuehrer and he stretched me a lot. Sometimes it was intentional when he’d suddenly, out of nowhere, say, “Okay, tonight we’re going to sit up all night.” And other times it was simply because he was sick, at very inconvenient times, and sick long periods of time. It required, in my case, getting very little sleep. And I found I could survive on less sleep than I had been told, or that I had thought. And I was just capable of more than I had thought. So always be alive to that that you’re capable of more than you think. Don’t sell yourself short. As the Buddha said, there are grand distinctions that are possible in the practice. You can get the mind to do things you wouldn’t have imagined otherwise. It all comes down to taking this question seriously. What, when I do, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? And will I get to be really long-term and genuinely happy? So there you are, focusing on the future, the long-term, not just the present moment. But where does that start, and what are the actions you’re going to do that are going to have an impact on the future? They’re all done right here in the present. So we focus on the present because it has long-term implications. And it’s up to you to decide where those implications are going to go.

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