The Direction of the Present

August 15, 2017

When we come out to a quiet place like this, we’re gaining some physical seclusion. In other words, we’re away from other people. It’s not complete. We have our interactions with one another. But we do have long periods during the day when you don’t have to interact. And that’s when you find that you’re still not alone. As the Buddha said, you have your cravings as your companions. So to ensure that you’re not totally consumed by the cravings, you’re given a task to get the mind to settle down and be still. And you’re given a question, “Where am I creating any unnecessary suffering here? What am I doing that’s causing that suffering? Can I stop?” You give some direction to the solitude, some direction to the seclusion. It’s kind of like going through a rite of passage. Back in pre-modern societies, they would send people out into the wilderness for a while, just as they were becoming adults, to basically find themselves. But not just to find themselves, but to find their direction. And they’d usually be given a question. So that their time out in the wilderness wouldn’t be totally directionless. The idea being that you would come out of that having a sense of where you wanted to go, what you wanted to do with your life. It was your first chance to have some time by yourself in most societies like that. It’s good to sort through the voices in your head to figure out which ones to believe and which ones to put aside. Which identities to take on and which ones to not. So it’s good to remember that while you’re here, the solitude is not just an end in itself or a static place. You want to give it some direction. If you take on the Buddhist direction, of course, it is that quest to minimize and ultimately end the unnecessary suffering. The suffering that the mind places on itself. Because in his analysis, that’s the only suffering that weighs the mind down. It’s the self-created suffering. So we’re here in the present moment not just to sit in the present moment or to enjoy the present moment. We’re here because the present moment is heading in a particular direction. The things you do right now will have consequences now and in the future. You want to be clear about what you’re doing so that you can direct yourself in the right direction. And make sure you like the direction you’re going. The Buddha refers to this in one of the passages we just chanted right now, the protection and the blessing that’s provided by having yourself rightly directed. You have a direction that you want to go in. That’s a good direction. The Buddha has you reflect on this every day. There’s a series of reflections that the monks are supposed to reflect on daily. One of them is, “Days and nights fly past, fly past. When am I becoming?” In other words, you look at the actions you’re doing, the thoughts, words, and deeds. You look at your meditation practice. Ask yourself, “Is this making me the kind of person I want to be? Am I becoming a better person? Am I becoming lazier, more complacent, less complacent? What direction am I going? Is it the right direction?” And if it’s not, you make a change. The purpose of the solitude is to get to see the direction as clearly as possible and to see what you’re doing. So if changes are required, you have a sense of what it is you’re doing that’s creating the problem. Yet the mind isn’t quiet enough. It can’t make these connections. Because a lot of what’s going on in the mind is like the larger part of an iceberg. Only a small part sticks above the water. The major part is underwater. And what we’re trying to do as we meditate is to lower the water level so we can see more and more of what’s going on. What’s going on in the iceberg? And see what direction it’s taking. The Buddha’s view of time is very dynamic. The present moment is not static. It has an arrow, what physicists call the arrow of time. There’s a discussion in physics as to whether the physical universe really has time or whether time is just a concept that we apply. We live through time, but maybe the universe itself has no sense of time. And if you think of a universe where everything is very simple, it is possible. But when you look at complex systems, you realize that you can’t run a complex system backwards. So in a more complex view of nonlinear systems, the arrow of time is built into the way things are. And it’s definitely built into the way the mind is. Even though the mind may regress in some ways, it’s not basically just going back to where it came from. It’s still going forward, but it’s just going down. So you want to make sure that it’s not going down. You want to turn that arrow of time up, the arrow of your actions. So it is going toward less and less suffering for yourself and for other people. So each time your mind wanders off, ask yourself, “Where is this taking me?” “Is this really where I want to go?” And there may be an urge to go in that direction, but can you believe all your urges? Because often our urges are blind. You want to bring some clarity to this, to all aspects of the path, in terms of what you do, what you say, and what you think. Ask yourself, “Where is this going?” We talked a little bit today about idle chatter. What’s idle about it is that it has no purpose. Daily chitchat, if it has a purpose, it doesn’t count as idle chatter. It’s part of the social grease that keeps society moving smoothly. The problem is when you open your mouth just for the sake of having your mouth open and having some sound coming out, and in desperation to fill up the space with conversation, you just pull anything out of the mind. Anything pops up and the mind goes right past that. The filter. And that’s the way you engage in conversation. You ask yourself, “What am I becoming? What kind of person am I becoming?” The Buddha says you should have a test for your speech. One, is it true? Two, is it beneficial? And three, is this the right time and place? Because speech does take you in a particular direction. You do become a certain kind of person by the way you speak. And it’s your choices, from moment to moment, from action to action, that create the kind of person you are, or that you’re becoming. By asking yourself these questions about right speech, is it true, beneficial, is it timely? You’ll learn to exercise it. You’ll exercise your own discernment. In the four types of right speech, there’s only one that’s a precept. It’s the precept against lying. The Buddha recommends that everything that comes out of your mouth should be a truth. That’s something you hold to. As for the other three, there is no precept. It’s a principle. That means that you have to learn how to apply it. The Buddha does recommend that in different societies there are different rules for what’s appropriate, what is timely in those societies. So you have to be sensitive to that too, as to what really is timely. It’s very easy to lie about these things to yourself. So you have to be extra careful. Asking these questions about your speech, then you start applying the same questions to thoughts coming up in your mind. Is it true? Is it beneficial? Is it the right time for that? Like right now, when you’re with the breath, thoughts that wander off are not in line with the right time and place. There are other times to think about where you’re going, what you’re doing. But you have this question always posed in the mind, because the question gives a direction to the present moment. The same as you get into concentration, there’s a question you carry into that. One, how to get the mind to settle down and to get a sense of refreshment out of the concentration. And then from there, there’s another question. Is there still some unnecessary stress here? And if so, what am I doing that’s contributing to it? This is one of the reasons we look for inconstancy, even in the concentration, because it’ll indicate when you’re doing something that’s more stressful and when you’re doing something that’s less. If you notice what it is, then the question is, can I drop that action that’s causing the stress? What happens? You can carry this through whatever level of concentration you have, whether it’s a jhana or not a jhana, or how many jhanas there are. Otherwise the same question, is there any unnecessary stress here? So it gives you something to look for. It also gives a direction to what you’re doing. You’re not just floundering around, or zoning out, or getting the kind of concentration that turns into a torpid concentration where it’s still but there’s not much clarity. Concentration is what keeps you alive. It reminds you that the present moment does have a direction, willy-nilly. And the question, of course, is, is there a direction you want to go? Could you make some choices that would improve the direction? So that question, “Days and nights fly past, fly past, when am I becoming right now?” is one to which you can give a good answer. You’re becoming the person you want to be. You’re going in the direction you want to go. Because as I said, everything is willy-nilly going in some direction. It’s not like you have a place where you can sit and stay and not have to move. Even when you think you’re just sitting, sometimes it’s just sliding down. It’s like climbing up a big pile of gravel. If you stand still, you start sliding down. So remember that the present moment does have a direction, and it’s up to you to direct it in the right way, where you want to go. And you do have the choice in getting the mind still like this, bringing it to a state of physical seclusion and mental seclusion, where you’re able to fend off your cravings with the right questions. It allows you to see clearly both where you’re going and where you want to go. And if you’re not going in the direction you want to go, how to change course.

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