Step by Step

September 5, 2017

Sometimes when you start meditating, it’s as if you get a gift from your past karma. The mind settles down very easily. You get a taste of what real concentration can be like. But the gift can last only so long. And it’s almost as if it blights the rest of your meditation for a while. As you try to get back to where you were, you can’t find your way back. It’s as if you were given a free helicopter ride up to the top of a mountain. So you get a sense of what can be seen from the top, and then you’re taken back down to the bottom and the helicopter disappears. So you’ve got to approach the meditation as you would in a case like that. When you get to the top of the mountain, you can’t expect helicopters to come. You’ve got to climb. And how do you climb a mountain? You climb it step by step. Instead of thinking about how great it is at the top of a mountain, how far it is away, you focus on the next step, and then the next step, and then the next. Break things down. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha analyzes all those different aspects of the mind, all those lists he has about the different things the mind can do, the different elements that go into the path. The four establishings of mindfulness, the four right efforts, the four bases of power, the five strengths, the five faculties, the seven factors for awakening, the eightfold double path, the thirty-seven wings to awakening. And what you’ve got to do in the course of the meditation is figure out which one of those wings you need to focus on next. What’s the step that needs to be done next? Like with the breath. We settle down with the breath for the sake of concentration, but for the time being you don’t have to think about concentration at all. Nobody gets to jhana focusing on the idea of jhana. You get there by focusing on this breath, and then this breath, and then this one, and you keep at it. There’s nothing magical about it, which means that you have to be very meticulous in what you do, very observant in what you do. In John Lee’s images of mastering a skill, the teacher tells you how to, say, weave a basket, and gives you some ideas about what a basket should look like. But then you’re set loose to learn from the reeds that you’re weaving. You weave a basket. And then you look at it. Is it good? Well, no. But then what’s wrong with it? Is it too fat? Is it lopsided? What can you do to make it better? Is the weave rough in some spots? Is it uneven? The next time around you try to make the weave a little bit more even. Smooth out the rough spots. Make sure everything gets balanced. After a while you make a lot of baskets that you don’t like, but eventually you’ve got a sense of how to do it well. There’s nothing magical. It’s just step by step by step, and a willingness to look at it step by step. If you think of big picture questions like, “Who are you as a meditator? What does this say about you as a meditator, the fact that you’re having trouble settling down?” You’re going to get yourself into trouble. Get that “you” out of there, and just say, “What’s this action now? And what does it do?” When you break things down step by step like that, then you find that they’re manageable. And the big job, even though it is a big job, gets broken down into manageable bits like that. And you take them one at a time, one at a time, one at a time. And you finally find that you’re getting on the trail up the mountain, without thinking about the summit. Just thinking about the next step, the next step, the next step on the trail. Dogen in Zen Master talks about how the development of the path and the realization of cessation are basically the same thing. There are two of the duties with regard to the Four Noble Truths. What he means is that you don’t look outside of the path for the end of the path. It’s in developing the path step by step by step, it’s in the act of doing that that you begin to see that suffering is beginning to get less. And your craving to go right up to the top of the mountain right away gets put aside as you focus on the steps of the path. So your anticipations and your wishes and your wants about how much faster it could be and the frustration over not going fast, you’ve just got to learn how to put those aside. Those are not the path. The path is doing whatever has to be done next. The other thing to realize, of course, is that if you think about the teaching on the principle of karma, each moment is a new moment. It’s going to be influenced by potentials coming from the past. It’s going to be influenced by whatever level of skills you’ve been able to manage so far. But there’s always an element of freedom in your choice of what you’re going to do right now. I received a strange question today about what’s the relationship between karma and grace. The person was saying, “Well, you need to have both in any spiritual path.” So where’s the room for grace in Buddhism? Of course, we don’t talk about grace, but we do have that moment of freedom, i.e., right now. The influences coming from the past are tendencies and they’re potentials. You actualize them by your choices that you’re creating right now. And that’s what creates the present moment. So that element of freedom right there is what gives you some hope. It doesn’t matter how bad your meditation has been in the past, there’s always hope for a new insight, a new change of heart. There’s always something clicking inside that you see that you didn’t see before. There’s always that possibility. In fact, getting to know that possibility is a large part of the meditation right there. Whether there’s a lot of bliss or rapture, that’s not the issue. The issue is, what do you understand about your freedom of choice right now? What are the options available to you? What is the most skillful option that you can think of right now? And you do that regardless of what you’ve done in the past. You’re not stuck in your old ways unless you stick yourself in them. You’re going to always turn over a new leaf. So this possibility is always here, and it’s found by your choice. It’s that process of being very carefully aware of the little things you’re doing right now. This is one of the reasons why in the forest tradition so much emphasis is placed on being observant about what you’re doing, even in little tiny things, about how you clean a place, how you put things in order, how you handle the little manual skills of the day. You’re trying to figure out what’s the best way to do this, what’s the best way to arrange things, what’s the best way to clean things. It may seem like minor affairs, but giving some thought to those minor affairs gives you practice in how you give thought to things that are more important, i.e., the little things in the mind. Little bits of greed, aversion, and delusion that, if you’re not careful, can grow into something large. Little bits of mindfulness, alertness, ardency, discernment, that, if you are careful, can grow into something large. So much lies in little things and your freedom of choice in trying to do the little things well. When John Lee makes a lot of this, he says, before the Buddha became the Buddha that we bow down to, he made himself really small. He abandoned his family and went off into the forest. If he had died at that point, a few people might have regretted it, but that’s not that many. He made himself into a nobody, just focused on his breath, kept his awareness right there at the breath, right at the present moment, and then began noticing his mind as it was there at the present moment. At that point, as John Lee said, then his goodness exploded. It fills the world. So be willing to make yourself really small and deal with the small things. Because as you get to know the small things, the whole principle that the small things reflect the large patterns will play out in your life, and the little things will have a big impact. But for the time being, don’t think about the big impact. Put that in the back of your mind, and put the small things in the front of your mind, because that’s where the work is done.

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