The Time-driven Now

October 30, 2023

There are some people who say that when you focus your attention on the present moment, you’re in the eternal now. You’re outside of this time-flowing of past and future. And if you want to look for immortality, this is where you look for it. This is an attitude that the romanticists had, my brother, about the immortality of the soul, they said, when you have the immortality of the present moment. That’s not the Buddhist approach. The Buddhist approach is that when you’re in the present moment, you’re very much in time. You come here because there’s work to do in time. That passage is what the Buddha talks about being in the present moment. All are in relationship to the issue of death. It’s something you have to prepare for, and you don’t know when it’s going to happen. You do what you can right now. You can’t put it off. Because if you put it off to tomorrow, you may go before tomorrow. So you focus right here, because there’s work to be done. When the Buddha talks about mindfulness of death, it’s not just to remind you that it could happen at any time. But there are certain skills that you’ve got to develop. The mind has this tendency to run with its cravings. The image the Buddha gives us of a fire that’s blown by a wind that goes a long distance, and some of his other images, he talks about going from one house to another. You’ve got this house that’s on fire, and the fire blows from this house and goes to another one. In those days, the physics of fire was understood that fire had to latch on to something, had to cling to something in order to burn. So what was it clinging to as it went from one house to the next? It clung to the wind. In the same way, the Buddha says, you as a being cling to your cravings. In one way, that might sound good. You crave to go someplace. You follow that craving, and you get to go where you want to go. The problem is, the craving is pretty erratic. It’s like a wind. It’s like these winds we’ve been having the past couple of days. They blow from the east, and they blow from the west, and they blow from the north and the south, and then they stop. Then there are gusts. So you hang on to your cravings. You have no idea where they’re going to take you. Unless you’ve trained the mind. So that’s why we’re here. When the Buddha has you contemplate death, it’s not just thinking, “I’m going to die, I’m going to die.” It’s to remind yourself that there’s a lot that can be done right here, right now, with each breath, as it comes in, as it goes out. That’s the attitude you should have. Be on top of the present moment. Don’t put off the work that needs to be done. So look at your cravings right now. And a good way to get your cravings in line is to focus them on getting the mind to settle down. The Buddha talks about accomplishing a great deal in the present moment. It starts with this. Focusing on the breath, getting sensitive to the breath, and then training yourself with the breath. The first training is to breathe in and out sensitive to the whole body. Then the Buddha says you calm bodily fabrication. Before you calm it down, you want to energize it first. Breathe in a way that gives you energy. Sometimes in long and out short can help. Other times it just feels good to think of the breath bathing the whole body and all the parts of the body breathing together. At the same time, you’re going to be looking at the feeling quality of the breath. Train yourself to breathe in a way that gives rise to that sense of rapture, refreshment, and pleasure. Be sensitive to how the feeling tone of the breath has an impact on the mind. The more soothing the breath feels, the easier it’s going to be to calm it down. The Buddha has you look at mental fabrication, which includes not only the feeling but also the perceptions. How do you perceive your breath when the mind wanders off? How do you perceive that process? For a lot of us, it seems simply inevitable. You’re here and then you’re gone. It’s very hard to trace back. But as you get more sensitive to what’s going on inside, you begin to realize that there are many conversations going on, and some of them are not the official conversation. The official conversation, of course, is that you’re going to be right here with the breath, because the important work needs to be done. But then you’ve got yourself with the lazy conversations, the conversations that would rather think about something else. And they lay their traps for you. And if you’re alert to that fact, if you have a perception that that’s possible, then you can begin to notice, “Oh yeah, it really does happen that way.” That’s part of the mind that’s already decided that as soon as your mindfulness lapses, you’re going to go. They’re going to go. They’ve done studies of people’s brains, hooked up electrodes, and they’ve learned to read patterns in the brain. And they can tell sometimes that people have made up their mind to do something before they’ve been aware of it. Now, the scientists doing this have come to the conclusion that the material side of the brain is what’s running the show, and the conscious side is just going along for the ride. So the question is, are these people really conscious of what’s going on in their own minds? Because it’s very easy to deny things that you’re actually complicit in. The more mindful you become, the more alert you become, the more you’re on top of these decisions as they’re being made. So hold that perception in mind, that it is possible for these underground things to make their decisions. But it’s also possible for you to sense them. That way you can hit them off at the pass. So breath meditation is a training. You’re not just here passively accepting whatever comes in with the breath, goes out with the breath, comes into the mind, goes out of the mind. As the Buddha says, you direct your mind. Here you’re directing it to the breath and directing it to learn the skill of how to stay with one object, an object that allows you to be in the present moment with a sense of well-being, so that when things come up in the mind, you can see them and you can understand what to do with them. That’s what the real work of the meditation is, because you’re going to be seeing your cravings. Craving for sensuality, the desire to enjoy sensual fantasies. Craving for becoming, the desire to take on an identity and a world of experience. Craving for non-becoming, the desire to erase some of those becomings. This is where you get to see them. After all, these are the things that will take you who knows where when you’re dying, if you have no training. But if you have some training, you can get them under some control. But you have to put yourself in a position where you can see them clearly and not run along with them, and not deny them. You’re strong enough to admit that, yes, there are some unskillful things coming up in the mind. But you’re experienced enough and alert enough not to go with them. That’s the kind of training you want to do. Really take the fact of death seriously. And really, there’s nothing else that’s serious. But for most of us, it’s too serious, so we put it off. We don’t like to think about it. We always say, “There’s nothing you can do about it, so what the hell? Do whatever you want.” Or make up these theories about the eternal present, that somehow being right here, right now, all the time, you’ll be perfectly okay. A lot of bad things are going to happen right here, right now. And the mind can make a lot of stupid decisions right here, right now. That’s the problem. This is not the eternal now. This is the timely or time-driven now. And you want to get some control over it before time slips away. So we’re here to get the mind to settle down. We’re here to get the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being so that it can see. So when you’re gauging your concentration and trying to ask yourself, “What is this great deal that can be done here in the present moment with this breath coming in and going out?” That’s the answer. We’re working on getting some control in here. And the control doesn’t come simply from the desire for control. It also comes from some experience, learning how to direct it. Direct your mind when it’s recalcitrant, learning how to deal with the hindrances. Because those are going to be a big problem. You can imagine when you’re dying, the pain that comes with whatever illness there is. And for most of us, the escape from pain is sensuality, sensual desire. That’s a big hindrance right there. There’s going to be some anger, and it will. Sometimes you start thinking about your life and you start thinking about the people who have wronged you. You don’t want to go with that. But for some people, as they get older, that’s all they feed on. There’s drowsiness, sleepiness. You want to learn how to not be overcome by that. And the body’s going to be really sleepy when it’s very tired. Restlessness, anxiety. Thinking about some of the wrong things you’ve done in the past, being anxious about where that’ll take you. As the mind gets out of control, you say, “What happened to all that concentration I did?” Instead of redoubling your efforts, you just say, “Well, maybe it was a waste of time.” All of that can really direct the wind of your cravings in some pretty bad places. And gaining concentration to get a sense of well-being can help us overcome the hindrances, help us understand our cravings, and learn how to direct them. Ideally, we can put out the fire that’s eager to move on. But if we can’t put it out, direct it in a good place where we can continue practicing. This is the kind of work that can be done right here, right now. This is how you prepare for the fact that we’re going to die. So mindfulness of death doesn’t just keep repeating “death, death, death” as a theme. It doesn’t just remind you what could happen at any time. There are things that are going to happen in the process. The Buddha warns you how the process happens. So you can prepare yourself. And those are the skills you can work out right here, right now. And there’s nowhere else you can work on them, and you don’t want to put them off to some other time. So just keep telling yourself, “A lot can be done right here, right now.” And in that way, there’s some hope that you won’t have to suffer unnecessarily. So let’s take a moment to learn about time and our relationship to time. Not to run away from time, but to understand it. Because it’s our involvement, our processes of fabrication in the present moment, that’s what keeps us in touch with time. And this is where we get to see them as they happen.

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