What Are You Looking For?

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There’s a school of thought that says that when you bring the mind into the present moment, you don’t really need to have much of a background in what the Buddha taught. That as you pay attention to the present moment, watching things arising and passing away, you’re sure to come to the important insights. It’ll be the same for everybody. The Buddha doesn’t belong to that school of thought, though. He realized that when you come into the present moment, what you’re going to find will depend on what you’re looking for. And what you’re looking for will depend on where you’re coming from, in the sense of what frame of reference you’re going to bring to the practice. It’s like going into the wilderness. Some of the first white people who saw the Grand Canyon wrote that we are the first and probably the last who will ever want to come to this God-forsaken place. But then in later decades, people’s attitudes changed until the Grand Canyon was seen as something really beautiful and awe-inspiring. And more and more people wanted to come, because they were looking for something different. Before wilderness was seen as beautiful, it was seen as a place where you went to get food, where you went to get nourishment, raw materials. But it was a dangerous place. You went there only when you felt you really had to. But then later, as civilization became more and more dominant, where civilization suddenly became the vast sea in which there are little islands of wilderness, people’s attitude toward wilderness changed. They came to the wilderness looking for a refreshment, looking to get back to what seemed to be a more natural environment. So they found different things. It’s the same when you come to the meditation. What are you looking for? In the beginning, you want to look for a place for the mind to rest, because it’s been frazzled by its dealings with the world. When people get stressed out, they develop nervous diseases, because they’re taking on so many different things all at once. So it’s good to come to the present moment and have just one task to do, and a task that feels nourishing. You focus on the breath. Allow the breath to have free reign throughout your body. It’s not squeezed out by all the thoughts. They’re taking up residence here and there in different parts of the body. So you want it to rest. But then once it’s rested, what are you going to see? What are you going to do with the mind when it’s rested? It was back when I was in Thailand. I visited Ajahn Uttai. I came when he was talking to a group of laypeople. And so he turned to me and started to ask me some questions. One of the questions was, “When Westerners come to the monastery, what do they come for?” And I answered, “Well, they come for peace of mind.” And one of the laypeople said, “I love Westerners. They always go straight to the top.” And Ajahn Uttai said, “What do you mean straight to the top? You even come in animals want peace of mind. If you’re a human being, you want to have dharma and virtue.” So what do you mean by that, dharma and virtue? The dharma, of course, teaches us that we live in a world where there is suffering. And it tells us, “Well, what is that suffering? Where is it coming from?” It’s coming from within. The suffering isn’t necessarily pain. It’s the fact that we’re clinging to activities of the mind, which the Buddha identified as five. We create the form of the body in our mind. We create feelings. We create perceptions, thought constructs, acts of consciousness. We don’t create these things out of thin air. The raw material comes from our past actions. And a lot of the ways in which we turn these things into actual experiences in the present moment comes from past habits. But those habits can be changed. We can observe itself, see what it’s doing, and learn from its mistakes, is what allows us to put an end to suffering. So the suffering is in an activity we’re doing, and it’s coming from the craving that motivates that activity. But we can learn to put the present moment together in a different way, in terms of virtue, concentration, discernment. So we can abandon the causes of suffering and find a dimension inside the mind that is totally outside of space and time, which is not subject to change, not subject to suffering. We have that potential within us. So it’s good to reflect on that because that puts the present moment into perspective. What you can do what you can accomplish by being here. There’s more than just relaxation. There’s more than just stress reduction. Which is not to say that those things are not useful, but they can be put to use. We don’t go for them as ends in and of themselves. This is one of the reasons why when you’re practicing concentration and you’re staying with one thing, you want to make sure that you stay alert. The Buddha identified three qualities of mind that go into right mindfulness that leads to right concentration. One of them is mindfulness itself, the ability to keep something in mind. But the question is, what are you keeping in mind? The second quality is alertness, knowing what you’re doing while you’re doing it. But what are you doing? The important thing is that third quality, ardency, when you really try to develop skillful qualities in the mind and abandon unskillful ones. So the mindfulness is there to direct you and to remind you what is skillful, what is unskillful, and what works and what has worked in the past. And you want to be alert to see what the results are. So you can figure out, are there more lessons you need to learn, more things you need to observe? And you find out that the alertness is going to be really important, because it is possible to rest the mind just by going to sleep or zoning out. Some people find a really comfortable spot in the meditation and they drop the breath and go for the comfort. As far as they’re concerned, they can zone out, but it doesn’t matter because it’s a nice pleasant place to stay. But it doesn’t solve the problem of suffering. It’s like getting on a path and then just lying down on the path. It may be more comfortable than lying down on thorns and branches and creepy crawly things on the forest. But it still doesn’t take you anywhere. You want to get the mind to settle down, be still, so that it can observe itself. After all, the cause of suffering is coming from within. You want to be able to see, well, what is it that leads to that suffering? And what is the suffering itself? When the Buddha says suffering lies in clinging to the aggregates, how do you recognize the aggregates? How do you recognize clinging? Understanding the aggregates, it’s useful to think about the process of eating. Which is one of the most basic processes we have, that we get engaged in. It’s what defines us as beings, is we have to eat both physical and mental food. But think about physical food for the time being. We’ve got form, i.e. the body here, which needs sustenance. And we’ve got the form of the food outside. And there’s a feeling, there’s a feeling of hunger that drives you to look for food. Aiming at a feeling of fullness. There are perceptions when you try to perceive. What kind of hunger do you have? And what outside is going to satisfy that hunger? A lot of our perceptions revolve around what’s edible, what’s not edible. What we like and what we don’t like. Even little children. You get a child crawling across the floor and they run across an object. What do they do? Stick it in their mouth to see if it’s edible. That’s how our range of perceptions starts to develop. And then there are thought constructs. When you find something, what are you going to do with it? Some forms of food need to be cooked, some forms need to be chopped up, prepared in different ways so that you actually can eat them. And how are you going to go about finding them to begin with? That’s all in the planning. And then there’s consciousness of these things. Aware of what you’re doing. These are all aggregates. Aggregates are not things, they’re activities. And it may be that the Buddha focused on these five because they are so intimately related to the act of feeding and the things we cling to really strongly. In other words, these activities are the ones that enable us to eat so we hold on to them tight. And then he identifies four different types of clinging. One is clinging to sensuality, where you make plans for sensual pleasures, starting of course with plans for food. What you’re going to eat tonight, how you’re going to fix it. Or maybe fixing it that way wouldn’t be good. How about fixing it some other way? You can spend a lot of time thinking about that. Our Songkran festival was an exercise in that. What are you going to fix? How are you going to fix it? So we really cling to that in the sense that we derive a lot of pleasure from it. There are so many times when you plan a sensual pleasure and it actually comes. Or you actually get it. And it’s not as satisfying as you thought it was. But that doesn’t mean you give up on sensual thinking. You just tell yourself, “Well, I’ve got to plan things better next time.” But the Buddha says we’d be better off without that kind of thinking. Then there’s the clinging to views. Our views about the world. Clinging to habits and practices. Our ideas about how things should be done. And then clinging to our sense of self. And these are the things we have to learn how to undo by undermining the craving that leads to them. What the Buddha calls craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming. Craving for sensuality, as I said, is where we enjoy our fantasies around sensual pleasures. Craving for becoming is when you think of a pleasure. The question is where is that pleasure to be found? There’s going to be a world of experience in which that pleasure is found. In other words, parts of the world that are relevant to that pleasure go into that particular becoming. And there’s a sense of you in that world that’s going to try to find it. That it’s going to become and can function on mind and earth levels, just as thoughts in the mind, as you fantasize about how you would like this and like that, and then you start thinking more seriously about how you’d actually go about getting it. And then on the major level, when you die, and you can’t stay in this body, the world of this particular body, you’re going to be pushed out, evicted, and the mind grabs onto any desire that comes floating past and goes with it, then creates a new identity around that. And that’s how you take rebirth in a different world of experience. That’s how we got here in the first place, in this world of experience. And there’s craving for non-becoming when you’re disgusted with a particular world of experience that you’re inhabiting, or you’re disgusted with yourself, and you’d like to see the whole thing annihilated. But that, the Buddha discovered, becomes another kind of craving and clinging, and then it leads to more suffering. So to see these activities of the mind really clearly, you’ve got to get the mind into concentration, so it’s really still enough to see these subtle activities in the mind. That’s why we’re here right now. Not just to enjoy the concentration. Although enjoying the concentration gives us an important pleasure to help pry us away from our sensual desires. Because for most of us, as the Buddha said, our only alternative to pain is being fascinated with sensual thoughts. But here you can create a sense of well-being just by being with the breath, allowing the breath to flow freely throughout the body with a sense of ease, a sense of harmony inside. That gives you an alternative. Then he gives you other views. In other words, he provides you with new things to cling to on the path. Right view, in terms of the four noble truths, which is not so much a question of you in what world, but a question of what activities lead to suffering, regardless of who you are or what the world is. And then the right habit of habits and practices, the precepts we follow, the practice of concentration, and a different sense of self, one that’s competent to do this path and will benefit from it. You can take the Buddhist teachings and train yourself through your powers of observation, through your commitment to actually doing it. So you can take those words and what we learned from the Buddha, and you can actually translate them into real qualities in the mind. So we assemble this better form of becoming with better pleasures, so that we can understand this is how the mind creates a state of becoming, even the best state of becoming. We see how it functions. When we understand this state of becoming, it helps us understand the more unskillful ones, and to see through them and be able to let them go. To realize that, yes, we actually are creating a lot of unnecessary suffering for ourselves. Eventually you want to end your passion even for the state of becoming that’s the path. But in the meantime, you learn how to put it together. So it requires that you be really alert and really ardent, and not just rest here. You rest, but then you rest in the same way that you rest in the middle of the day when you’ve been working. You rest so you can do more work for the rest of the day. Then when you get tired again, you rest some more. So these are some of the things you can find inside if you approach the present moment from the point of view of the Buddha’s teachings and the Four Noble Truths about what is suffering, what causes it, how it is possible to put a total end to it, and then how you do that. If you come into the present moment looking for that, you’ll see a lot more than you would have seen otherwise. You read advertisements when they say, “Come to our meditation center. We have retreats on learning how to be equanimous, how to be joyful in the world, how to whatever.” It’s all about staying stuck in the world, staying stuck in your old habits, maybe developing a few little new ones to make it more pleasant. But from the Buddhist point of view, that’s simply learning how to fix up your prison cell. So it’s not quite as cold and forbidding and uncomfortable as it could be otherwise. But you’re still confined. The Buddha says you come into the present moment. It’s not to stay in the present moment. You actually find that as you take the present moment apart, you learn a lot of things that lie outside of the present moment. That’s not past or future. It’s actually outside of space and time entirely. That, the Buddha says, is a possibility. And all his noble disciples have discovered that, yes, he’s right. So think about that as you come into the present moment. What are you coming for? As you come into this wilderness here, what do you hope to get out of it? When you bring the right frame of reference, you’re going to see a lot more and benefit a lot more from the potentials that are here.

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