Why the Present Moment

May 26, 2024

When the Buddha talks about focusing on the importance of the present moment, trying to be in the present moment, it’s always in the context of mindfulness of death. He doesn’t say that the present moment is a wonderful moment or that it’s the only moment. He says there’s work to be done and you can do it only right here, right now. Why is there work to be done? Because we’re going to die. And as he explains it’s not simply the fact that we have to prepare ourselves for the fact that someday we will die, but at the moment of death some important decisions to make. One of the insights he gained into karma was that you can do good things in this lifetime, but if you have a switch in terms of your views before you die, or develop a wrong view at death, you could go to a bad place in spite of all the good you’ve done. Vice versa, you may have done bad things in this lifetime, but if you develop right view at death, then you go to a good place. So the choices made at the moment of death are really important. The problem of course is that your body is extremely weak, I mean it’s dying, and the mind is often weakened at the same time. So you have to learn how to develop some strength of mind, and be really firm in your right views, and particularly understanding what’s happening at death. The Buddha gives two analogies. One, simply that it’s like going from one house into another house, and then into another, and then another. In another analogy he talks about a house that’s on fire. And the flame from the house can spread, light, and ignite fires other places. He put those two analogies together. It’s like one house is on fire, and it goes to set another house on fire. The fire here stands for craving and clinging. The fire is carried by the wind, clings to the wind. The same way we cling to our cravings. And they can take us in all kinds of places. You might think well this is good, you get to go where you want to go. But the nature of craving, if you haven’t trained the mind, is that it can go anywhere. You may think you’re heading one place, and all of a sudden another desire comes in, gets in the way, pulls you off someplace else. So this is what we have to learn how to train in the present moment. It’s train our cravings, train our desires. Now some desires are good. The desire to practice the path, the desire to develop skillful qualities, abandon unskillful qualities. That’s actually part of right effort. So those desires are good. But there are other desires, the Buddha said, that lead to more states of becoming, and where there are states of becoming, there’s birth. This means we have to understand what is a state of becoming. It’s an identity you take on in a world of experience. And these worlds of experience can be like the human world around us. At the moment of conception you took on an identity within this world. But there are also worlds of experience inside the mind. And these are the ones that prime you to take on more becomings on the outer level. So these are the ones we train as we meditate. The ones we have to watch out for are craving for sensuality. In other words, enjoying the idea of fantasizing about what sensual pleasures you’d like, like the meal you might have tonight. You can think for a long time about what you would like to eat, how would you like to have it fixed. And the mind actually gets more pleasure out of those fantasies than it does out of the actual meal. Then there’s craving for becoming itself. The need to take on an identity someplace, somewhere. Usually around a desire of one kind or another. And sometimes the desire is simply, “I’ve got to take rebirth someplace.” This is how people end up in really bad places. They’re afraid that if they don’t latch on to something, they’ll be nothing. And as a result they can take all kinds of bad rebirths. And then there’s craving for non-becoming. In other words, you have an identity in a particular world and you’d like to destroy it. You’re unhappy with it. You’re upset. This can become especially strong as you approach death. The body’s not behaving the way it used to. It’s become a big problem. The world around you is not going the way you wanted it to. All you can think about is, “I’d just like to snuff yourself out.” Well, the Buddha discovered in the course of his awakening that that desire, too, actually leads to more becoming. As you’re thinking in terms of worlds and identities, even the idea of snuffing them out affirms a sense of worlds and affirms a sense of identities. It can take you to some pretty bad places. There are these states of what they call non-precipient beings, where people are basically unconscious. And they can be unconscious for a long time. But then the power of that craving that put them there wears off and they have to come back. As one of the foresters, John, says, “After having snuffed out your awareness for so long, you come back and you’re not all that bright. You’re not all that aware of what’s going on.” So these are the three kinds of craving you have to watch out for. And as we meditate, as the Buddha said, you’re trying to find a pleasure that has nothing to do with sensuality. That’s the first order of business. Because if you don’t have a pleasure that’s free from sensuality, the mind just keeps going back, no matter how often you think about the drawbacks of sensual pleasures. If you don’t have a pleasure to replace them, you’re going to go sneaking back. So when we’re meditating, we’re not just here to be aware of the present moment and say, “Oh yeah, it’s like this. Pain is like this. Aging is like this. Illness is like this.” If you really want to see what’s actually going on right now, you have to say, “Well, what am I doing right now to shape my experience?” This is one of the Buddha’s other insights. It’s our experience of the present moment. It’s not something just given to us. We have raw materials, and from those raw materials we shape our experience. So as we meditate, it’s not just a matter of being equanimous or being accepting. We’re actually putting together a path. Or in another image, we’re putting together a raft. And this path is going to involve taking on a state of becoming. But it’s a good becoming. One, because it’s free of sensuality. And two, because it allows you to see the processes in action. This state of becoming is right concentration. You have a body sitting here, and it breathes. And you’re going to find out that the way it breathes has a lot to do with your intentions. So intend to breathe in a way that’s comfortable. You’re free to choose that. Nobody’s forcing you to breathe in an uncomfortable way. Simply that we don’t think it’s important to pay that much attention to the breath. And yet it plays a huge role in shaping our experience of the body as a whole. Without the breath, we couldn’t move. Without the breath, the body and the mind would go their separate ways. So pay some attention to your breathing. Try to breathe in a way that’s comfortable. Experiment first with some long breathing. If long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t, you can make it shorter. Then you can try deep. And then compare that with shallow. You can try fast, compare that with slow. You can try heavy breathing, compare that with light breathing. And then put together the right combination. So the breath feels nourishing to the body, energizing when you need energy, relaxing when you need to relax. And you’ll learn an important lesson that you’re not here simply on the receiving end of the present moment. You can actually make your experience of the body a lot more pleasant just by paying careful attention to how you breathe. Because once the breathing feels comfortable, you can think of that sense of comfort spreading through the body. In Buddhist teachings, he talks about what’s called the wind element, which is basically the flow of energy in the body. And that’s directly connected to how you breathe. And that flow of energy flows through the nerves, flows through the blood vessels, all the way out to the pores of the skin. So hold that perception in mind. This is the world in which you’re living right now. You’re taking on the identity of a meditator in this world of your body, which is defined by how you breathe and how you’re aware of the breath. This is the state of becoming, which is part of the path. And you try to maintain this. And you notice that other states of becoming will come. There’s the desire to think about this, think about that. You tell yourself, “I’ve got something better here right now. I don’t need to go for those things. I’m training the mind so that it can understand the processes of becoming.” So the first order of business is to get at least some measure of stillness, some measure of full body awareness. And try to maintain that as best you can. And as that gets more and more solid, then you can have some time to look into the processes that would pull you away. As I said, these are other types of becoming that form in the mind. And Jhonsu, I used to call them the traveling places for the mind. You’re sitting here trying to be here in the present moment. All of a sudden you find the mind traveling someplace else. And then from there it goes someplace else, like a hobo hopping from one train to another, ending up in the Northwest Territories. When the mind is really quiet, you can begin to see, “How did these things form?” And it’s the same sort of thing. A desire appears in the mind. And then you latch on to that desire. And all of a sudden there’s a world in which that desired object exists. And you take on the identity of someone in that world. Even though it’s just an imagination, it’s a becoming. And it’s precisely this process you have to watch out for, because that’s what’s going to happen as you die. You suddenly find that you cannot stay in this body. And the craving will go rushing out like that flame nourished by the wind. If you learn how to have some control over your cravings now, you’re much more likely to be able to control where you’re going to go at the moment of death. Because you don’t want to simply accept “Well, this is the way death happens, and this is how my mind gets sucked into another level of being.” You just say, “Well, this is how it is, this is how it is.” You can end up being in some pretty bad places. You have to realize that you do have the power of choice. And choices really do make a difference. So learn how to choose well now. Get to know your desire as well now. Get to know the processes of becoming. What are the steps that lead up to it? Because as the Buddha saw, the best way to stop becoming, stop the whole process, stop all the suffering, is not to let the mind get into a state of becoming. If you try to destroy the becoming you already have, as he pointed out, you’re just creating a new becoming. But if you look at the processes leading up to it, you begin to see, “Oh, there’s this intention, there’s that act of attention, and I talk to myself in these ways, and I hold these perceptions in mind, and from those things the desire grows.” But if you can look at them simply as processes, then you can develop a sense of disenchantment with them. Because you see that you’ve been building your sense of who you are and the world in which you live out of some pretty flimsy materials. It’s like building a house out of crepe paper. It may look pretty, but it’s going to come falling down. The difference being that crepe paper is kind of light, but when states of becoming fall down, and the time comes when there’s suffering involved, as they age, grow ill, and die. Something that’s a lot heavier than crepe paper. So basically these things are flimsy but heavy. So we want to learn how to train the mind so that it doesn’t go for unskillful desires. Any flame that leaps out to a bad house, you don’t want to follow it. Ideally, of course, you learn how to put out the fire, but until then you have to learn how to get some control over which fires you want to encourage, and where you want the wind to blow, and how to keep it in the direction you want it to go. These are the skills we develop. As we meditate, we develop them where, when, right here, right now. That’s why we focus on the present moment. Not to just be observers of the present moment, but to realize the extent to which we’re producers of the present moment, and how we can produce better moments, and as a result, better becomings. So when aging comes, we don’t create suffering around it. When illness comes, we don’t create suffering around it. When death comes, we don’t create suffering around it. That’s the skill that the Buddha taught. And it’s a skill that hasn’t changed for the past 2,600 years, or since the time of even the previous Buddhas and previous aeons. This is the skill of the awakened ones. It’s a good skill to master.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/240526_Why_the_Present_Moment.mp3>