Now into the Future

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The Buddha once explained why he taught the development of skillful qualities and the abandoning of unskillful ones. And it had to do both with the present moment and with the future. These skillful qualities, when you acted on them, led to mental turmoil in the present moment and to a bad destination or bad experiences in the future, he wouldn’t have taught it, to develop skillful qualities. But because they lead to well-being in the present moment and well-being in the future, that’s why he taught them. No, he doesn’t deny that there are times when, in developing skillful qualities, it’s painful right now. You’re sitting here meditating and there are pains here, pains there, and sometimes there’s frustration in the mind, as things are not settling down, not as quiet as you’d like, not as blissful as you’d like. But that’s minor. The fact that you’re doing something good is something you should appreciate. You think of all the work that’s done in the world, where people have to do horrible things, and how they have to make themselves insensitive to the pain they’re causing themselves by doing unskillful things. Stop and reflect on the fact that you’re sitting here, you’re not harming anybody at all. You’re working directly with your own mind. It’s all good, even when it’s difficult. Conversely, the Buddha said that if developing unskillful qualities led to a sense of well-being in the present moment and to well-being in the future, he wouldn’t have taught to abandon unskillful qualities. But because they leave the mind in a turmoil right now, and lead to a bad destination in the future, that’s why he taught the abandoning of them. Here again he admits that there are times when doing unskillful things, killings, stealing, having illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants, killed some pleasure in the present moment. But there’s no peace of mind in doing those things. So when he’s focusing on the purpose of his teachings, both for the present moment and for the future, this is missed a lot of times. So much of us, this is placed on how important the present moment is. You live the present for the sake of the present. That somehow in staying in the present you get out of time. The present moment is a wonderful moment. The present moment is all you have. It’s not all you have. You’ve got past and future. And they’re here in the present. But you’re experiencing right now, in terms of the six senses, that’s past karma. What you’re doing right now is kind of an influence on the future. You look at the Buddha’s analysis of dependent co-arising, and there are many timescales in which you can interpret it. And the Buddha means you to interpret it on all those timescales. Everything from influences of one life going to a next life, or future lives beyond the next life, down to things happening instantaneously right here, right now. All of that stuff is going on right now. You look at the factors. It’s a long list, and it’s a complicated list. Lots of feedback loops. Feeling appears in several of the factors of the sequence. The whole thing is driven by ignorance. Ignorance is driven by the hindrances, by sensuality, by becoming, and more ignorance. There’s fabrication. There’s what’s called name and form. It’s all happening right here. Like in the factor of name, there’s intentions, attention, feelings, perceptions, contact. Contact here seems to be contact within the mind itself. In other words, you have an intention, and you can pay attention to it. You pay attention to a perception, and that will cause you to do certain things. Give rise to certain feelings. It’s all mixed up right here. And they’re happening moment by moment by moment. And for most of us, it’s all underground. This is why when they do experiments with people, asking them, “At what point did your mind make a decision?” They’ve got electrodes in the brain that can tell what’s going on. They can read sometimes the patterns in the mind. The brain lets them know that actually a decision was made before the person realized it was made. They come to the conclusion that the decisions are made by brainwaves, by physical things. Consciousness is just kind of an afterthought. But what it shows is that most people are really not very introspective. They don’t know what’s going on in their minds, even though these things are happening. And they have some sense of what’s happening, but they’ve learned to ignore it. They haven’t paid any attention. Because sometimes if you open up inside in the mind and see what motivates you, it’s not all very pretty. And so they just close the door. What we’re doing as we’re meditating is learning to open the door to get these things out into the light of day. We’re more on top of things. What’s happening right here, right now. What we’re doing right here, right now. Knowing there would be no experience in the present moment at all. We’re not just watching a TV show. We’re playing an interactive game. And there are many players, even in one mind. So we get the mind quiet. So we can understand these things. So we can sense these things. We can discern these things going on. So many times when people say, “I want to move on from concentration because the real work is with the insight.” But the insight’s not going to be clear unless the concentration is strong. This doesn’t mean you don’t gain insights on the way. Because a lot of times you learn about your mind as you’re trying to keep it still. If you can learn how to see distracting thoughts simply as perceptions, based on certain intentions, and you have the choice to pay attention to them or not, you’re gaining some insight. But you don’t just stop with that insight. You go back and try to strengthen your concentration because you need to get stronger and stronger concentration for things to settle down so you can see them clearly. At the same time you begin to develop an appreciation for subtle levels of well-being in the mind. Some people say, “I sit here and meditate and nothing feels much. It all feels very neutral.” Well, if you compare that neutral feeling with, say, a pain, you can realize, okay, the feeling of neutrality there is actually very pleasant compared to what it could be. Things are more subtle than you can detect. You have to keep your eye out for that. You do that by getting more and more still inside. And as you get used to more subtle levels of well-being, you come to appreciate more and more the Buddhist observation that the best thing there is is the unfabricated, something that’s not made up here in the present moment. Because you get the states of concentration that are really refined. And you learn to settle in, and they become a more and more normal part of your mind. And at first they seem very restful. But then as you get to know them, you realize, okay, there’s still a disturbance in there. This is an application of the principle that the Buddha taught Marula at the very beginning. You look at your intentions, you look at your actions while you’re doing them, and the long-term results. And you get more and more sensitive to when you’re actually harming somebody, when you’re harming yourself, harming others. And as you meditate, the word “harm” begins to evaporate, and you get simply down to “disturbance.” So again, you’re trying to see what still is disturbing the mind as you’re getting it quiet. And don’t look for the disturbance outside. It’s not in the sounds, it’s not in the temperature of the air. It’s in the mind itself. The mind that is in concentration is still disturbing itself. You want to sense that, and then see what you’re doing to create that disturbance. What actions are creating that disturbance? How can you stop those actions? This is how concentration and discernment go together. The concentration allows you to see subtle things you didn’t see before. And also to appreciate what it would be like to have something that’s totally unfabricated. Because as you undo fabrications, without the sense of well-being that comes from concentration, you feel threatened. I was talking to a Vipassana teacher one time, and he asked me, “What do you do with people who find that stream entry is disorienting?” And I tell him, “Well, it’s not stream entry. You can force yourself to see things as inconstant, stressful, not-self. But if there’s no foundation in the mind, it gets very disorienting. You need this foundation. You need to make it strong.” And John Fuhring had a student one time who was complaining she’d been meditating with him for several years. And she was still in concentration. And he said, “It’s like you’re building a building. You want to make sure the foundation is strong. And when the foundation is strong, you can build as many stories on top of it as you like. But if you start building things on a weak foundation, the whole thing falls down.” Think about it for a little bit and then do it. At the time it seemed normal. It seemed like a big improvement over the old typewriters we had. Someone got me a better computer. It was a lot faster. Another one was a lot faster than that. If I were to go back to that first computer, right now I’d feel really frustrated. Why is it so slow? We tend to take the same attitude toward our meditation. The real work is done with insight. So go straight to insight. The real work with pain is focusing straight on the pain, asking questions. But to do those things properly, you need a foundation. You need to have strength. You need to have the training that comes with getting the mind really still. Because it develops your sensitivity. It develops a lot of good other mental qualities, your alertness, your ardency, your persistence, your determination, your integrity. A whole bunch of things are going to be necessary for the insight to have integrity as well. So have respect for the whole training. And realize that it’s not just a matter of being in the present moment. Because the present moment is moving, moving, moving into the future. And the Buddha wants you to take that into consideration after all. That’s his definition of the beginning of discernment. Keeping in mind your long-term welfare and happiness. And when you find there are things that you would like to do that would lead to long-term harm, you need to develop the wisdom to talk yourself into wanting to stop doing them. Things that you don’t like to do that will lead to your long-term happiness, you have to talk yourself into wanting to do them. That’s discernment in action. So it’s not just an appreciation of right here, right now. It’s an understanding of what you do right here, right now, is what creates right here, right now. And also creates your future. We’re concocting these things all the time. And the Buddha is giving us instructions on how to concoct them well for the sake of long-term happiness. If you find your mind trying to plan the future moment, remind yourself that the best preparation for the future is to get as much practice in mindfulness, concentration, discernment, all these other good qualities, that we’ll be able to deal with the unexpected in the present and the unexpected in the future. So the present is intimately connected to the future. Keep those dimensions, both of those dimensions, in mind. you

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