Keeping the Buddha in Mind

January 6, 2025

All things, the Buddha said, are rooted in desire, which means that things are always moving. And desire doesn’t just sit there. It has a name. It wants to go someplace. And this is where we need guidance. Because all too often, we go in the wrong directions. It’s very easy to forget the good things we’ve learned. Which is why, in addition to guidance, we need mindfulness, the ability to remember. Mindfulness, you have to remember, is not just awareness. You’re not simply on the passive side receiving things. You’re acting on your desires. And you have to remember what kind of desires are worth going with. Which ones are not. This is why Right Mindfulness goes together with Right Effort and Right View. The Buddha says these three qualities circle around every factor of the path. Right View tells you what the right version of that factor is and what the wrong version is. Right Effort tries to abandon the wrong version and develop the right one. Right Mindfulness is there to remember how to do that. In other words, you develop Right View and then Right Mindfulness keeps it in mind. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has you focus on the breath, develop mindfulness around the breath. It’s like a string around your finger. Every time you look at the string, you remember why you tied the string around the finger. In here, if you imbue your breath with mindfulness, it means wherever you go, you’ve got the Buddha talking to you. It’s right there in the breath. So learn to associate your breath with skillful mental qualities, being alert. In that way, you keep yourself on track, because this is what we all have to do. We have to keep ourselves on track, so nobody else is going to do it for us. People, other people, give advice. But it’s up to us to agree with it and then to remember it. Because all too often, all the good things we’ve learned just go out the window as soon as a very strong emotion comes in. It’s like a wind that blows and blows all the dharma out of your mind. And especially when you’re living in a world of Wrong View, which most of the world is. What gets blown into your mind are the attitudes that other people say are important. The issues that they have. Remember, the Buddha was very particular about which issues he would address and which ones he wouldn’t. He wasn’t the sort of person who would take on all comers, who would establish a philosophy that he was going to defend in the debating halls. Because his teaching was not the kind of teaching that was designed for debating halls. It was designed to live with and to offer guidance to make you happy. Think of how wisdom begins. That question, “What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” “What when I do it will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?” Think about that. That’s how the Buddha says wisdom begins, with the desire for long-term. And it’s wise in the sense that it realizes that it’s going to depend on your actions. Long-term happiness is possible. And of course, it’s better than short-term. It’s a very basic principle, but again, it’s one of those ones that we tend to forget. It’s so easy to go for the quick fix. When you have wisdom about it, when it’s wise and you can begin to trust it. The same with compassion. You realize that if your happiness depends on other people’s suffering, it’s not going to last. Again, you would think this is something that people in the world would understand. But then you look at the world, and people are going around very casually, wiping other people out, thinking that once they’re gone, they’re gone for good. Not realizing that karma is going to come back. So you have to take the happiness of other people into consideration. You have to think about their happiness too. Make sure that your happiness doesn’t harm them. Some of the things in your happiness may not please them, but as long as you don’t harm them, you’re okay. And you’re wise, and you’re compassionate. And finally, there’s the quality of purity. And once you decide that you want to be harmless, you really are careful to look at your actions. Watch yourself. That’s something we say to people when we know they’re going into a dangerous place, or they have dangerous tendencies inside themselves. That’s the situation in the world. One of the strangest phenomena you see in modern Buddhism is the idea that everything is interconnected and wonderful, and that somehow all we have to do is just embrace our interconnectedness. We’ll instinctively know the right thing to do, and we’ll automatically be compassionate, kind, good. But the Buddha saw that the world is a dangerous place, and your mind is a dangerous place. It’s a dangerous mind. So we’re going to look for happiness, try to do it in a way that’s wise and compassionate, and then really be careful about what you actually do. This is where heedfulness comes in. The Buddha’s instructions to Rahula are about looking at your actions, starting with the intention and looking at the actual results you’re getting while you’re doing it, and then the long-term results, and then learning from that. You’re asking your mindfulness for better and better knowledge, better and better things to remember. That’s how you make yourself pure, he said. In other words, you don’t just mouth words of wisdom or mouth words of compassion. Your actions really are wise, they really are compassionate. And your good intentions are not just good, but they’re also skillful. This is a skill we have to master. The Buddha’s basically saying, if you look for your happiness in the right way, you develop wisdom, compassion, purity, all the qualities of the Buddha himself. And then as you learn these lessons, you keep them in mind, to make sure that your desires keep going in the right direction. As we go through the day, as I was saying this morning, you want to think of the daily life as something you do in the context of your practice, and not the other way around. All too many people say, “How do I fit the practice into my daily life?” As if daily life were made out of concrete, with little cracks, like a sidewalk. You’re going to fit the practice into those little cracks. That’s not what you want. You want the practice to be large. You want it to be in the context. And then daily life fits into the practice. Anything that’s relevant to the training of your mind, you focus on that. That’s having top priority. Anything that gets in the way of training your mind, you say, “I’ve got to just drop that.” What this means, of course, is you have to look at your daily activities, your job, your family, as opportunities to develop the perfections. If there’s a situation in which you cannot develop the perfections, then you’ve got to get out. Don’t let the practice take priority. Always keep it in mind. This is why it’s so important that we understand what the Buddha meant by mindfulness. The word “sati” comes from a Vedic term which means “to remember.” People say, “Well, when the Buddha picked up the term, he just used it in a totally different way. He meant people to pay attention, and Pali didn’t have a word for paying attention, so he had to use the word for ‘remember.’” Well, that’s not the case. Pali has a perfectly good word for paying attention, “panasikara.” Every time we chant one of the Buddha’s sermons where he addresses the monks, he says, “Pay attention.” It’s not “sati.” It’s another word entirely. “Sati” is to remember. This is what you’re trying to remember, that lots of good lessons the Buddha has given for what to do in different situations. Some of the precepts cover all situations. Other aspects of his teaching cover specific issues that are going to come up. Because everything you’re going to experience is based on a desire, you want the Buddha’s input into those desires, to make sure you’re on the right track. So be mindful of what the Buddha taught. Be mindful of where he recommends you go. Because everything he taught was for the sake of happiness. And the difficulty of the path is we have other ideas for happiness. We have to learn how to straighten them out, to realize that the Buddha really was right, given the benefit of the doubt. As he said, there was a time when the Jains said that happiness is found through pain. They talked about King Vasanidhi living a more pleasant life than the Buddha. The Buddha said, “How do you know that? Can King Vasanidhi sit for seven days without moving and find happiness?” “Well, no.” Well, the Buddha could. Someone who can do that has really mastered a skill. So give him the benefit of the doubt when he says, “Try to be generous. Try to be virtuous. Try to train your mind. Look at every aspect of your life as a part of developing good qualities in your mind. When you’re kind, when you have good will for everybody you’re dealing with, when you’re patient, when you’re equanimous, the things you need to have when you’re dealing with other people, you’re also developing good qualities in your own mind. You’re going to benefit too. So fit your life into the practice. Keep the Buddha’s recommendations in mind for how you can find true happiness. Because they work.

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