What Am I BecomingQ

December 22, 2018

The Buddha said that as he began to get on the path, after he’d found the right path, after trying many wrong paths, one of the first things he did was to divide his thinking into two types. On the one hand, there was thinking imbued with sensuality, ill-will, harmfulness. On the other side, there was thinking imbued with renunciation. Non-ill-will, non-harmfulness. In other words, goodwill and compassion. And as he watched his thoughts, that’s what he was looking for. Not whether he liked his thoughts or whether the thoughts were entertaining, but simply what kind of qualities did they have. And he noticed that when you think in a certain way, the mind gets bent in that direction. In other words, your thoughts are not simply riding on water. They tend to leave a little rut. And then you follow that rut, you think that thought again, and there’s another rut, and it gets deeper and deeper and deeper. So he made up his mind that he was going to hold his mind in check whenever the unskillful thoughts came up. As for the more skillful thoughts, he’d let the mind roam in them as they liked. The image there was of cows during the hot season. The rice had been gathered. The cows could wander around. There was no danger they were going to get into. The cowherd could just sit there and have a sense of where his cows are and not be too concerned about them. But still, he said, when you think skillful thoughts for a day and a night, you’re going to get tired. That’s what induced his mind into concentration. As he got into concentration, he developed some knowledges. One of them was knowledge of how beings are shaped by their karma, shaped by their actions. The things you do in one lifetime carry over into another. So that principle, that how you bend your mind through your thoughts, got writ large. Of course, it’s not only through one lifetime having an impact on another lifetime. Sometimes things you do in this lifetime have an impact in this lifetime. Some of them have an impact right away. Others can take many lifetimes before they show. But the important principle is that it all comes out of your actions. And although there may be an element in your actions that is shaped by your past habits, it doesn’t have to be that way. If everything were already determined by your past actions, there’s nothing you could do. There’d be no reason for us to sit here and meditate. We sit here and meditate because there is work that can be done. We have choices we can make. We can look at the habits we’ve developed, the habits that have shaped us, and decide whether we really want to follow through with those or not. We give the mind a good place to stay. Staying with the breath, breathing in a way that feels good. Experimenting with the breath to find out what the body needs right now. So the mind can be put in a position where it can look at its various selves and its various habits with a little more objectivity. As the Buddha said, if you want to really understand something, you have to see it as something separate. So here we have to look at even our identities, the people we are, shaped by the actions we’ve done. We have to look at these identities a little bit from the outside. Fortunately, we can do that because we have so many identities inside. Each identity is shaped around a desire. Again, it’s lots of different bent parts of the mind or parts of the mind that have ruts. Some of them are more skillful than others. So you’re looking for the states of mind that are willing to act on what they know will give good results. Think down the line. Don’t go simply by what they want right now. You want some of these more far-seeing selves inside you to do the looking at the other selves. And as you meditate, you can strengthen them, because they do depend on a sense of well-being. When there’s a lack of well-being in the mind, the hungry selves take over, the impatient ones, the ones who don’t want to hear anything about improving their selves. They just want what they want. So to lift yourself above those voices, you’ve got to give the mind a good place to stay. So explore your breath. This is bending the mind in a good direction, making up your mind that you want to get settled down. And desire is not a bad thing on the path. Desire gets a lot of bad press in Buddhist circles. Ignorance Ignoring the fact that the Buddha himself included desire as part of right effort. You generate desire, he says, to do what is skillful and to abandon what’s not. You do that by motivating yourself. You give yourself pep talks. You remind yourself, “These actions are going to have a good benefit down the line.” In this way we feed off our anticipation. Here it’s skillful anticipation. “This is going to be good for us.” We’re not just hiding out in the present moment or pretending that the present moment is the place where we can stay. How could you stay in that present moment just a moment ago? It’s gone. This moment is going to be gone in a second. And it’s not just you’re observing the present moment or a passive observer. You’re actually constructing the present moment. There’s no way you can stay here as a final goal. But you can learn how to use the present moment as a path to something really good. And it’s up to you to choose. Remember the Buddha said that the mind is very changeable. It can take on all kinds of identities. He said, “Think of all the many species of animals there are in the world, from the tiniest ones up to the biggest ones.” He said, “The mind is even more variegated than that. It’s capable of all kinds of things.” So you’ve got all these potentials inside. And the mind is very changeable. It can change one from one to another very quickly. One of the themes of the forest tradition is that if you really want something, it’s going to come true. But you might look at your life and say, “Well, there are a lot of things you wanted that never came true.” Well, you didn’t stick with the desire well enough, consistently enough, skillfully enough. That’s what makes a difference. And even though there is that statement that purity of heart is to will one thing, well, sometimes willing one thing leads to an addiction. So you’ve got to be careful about what you will and what you follow through with. So as we meditate, we’re putting ourselves in a position where we can look at the different voices in the mind, look at the different identities we’ve taken on, and reflect on them. Are they taking you where you want to go? Which are the ones that will take you where you want to go? You’ve got to learn to strengthen them. There’s a reflection that the Buddha gives for the monks, and it’s useful for laypeople too. The days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I becoming right now? Well, the knowledge that what you become is based on what you do. And you notice, if you act in certain ways, you do become a different person. If you develop a new skill, you become a different person. If you start engaging in unskillful things consistently, you do become another person. Some of you are hardly recognized sometimes. So we do shape ourselves by our actions. The Buddha never defines what a human being is. We’re defining ourselves all the time. Which means that we’re free to step back and look at the process and ask ourselves, “Is this where we want to go? Is this what we want to become?” If you find something that’s really worth focusing on or something really worth desiring, there are going to be things you’re going to have to give up in order to see that desire through. And here again, in the meditations, you’re useful because it gives us that sense of well-being. It’s not only the comfort of the breath, but the fact that the mind can settle in and doesn’t have to move with so many other things in the world. You try to settle in, and it changes. It turns on you. It’s not there anymore. But here’s the breath. And even though this breath may go, there’ll be another breath to replace it, and another one to replace it. And you stay there with the breathing. There’s a sense, “Yeah, I don’t have to go anywhere.” You’re right at this one spot inside the breath. The mind can let down some of its tension, put down some of its defenses, and just settle in. And there’s a very strong pleasure that comes from that ability to settle in. And a part of it does simply serve as a good place to be. But also it serves as a good foundation for us to look into the mind and see what direction it’s going. And if we don’t like the direction it’s going, we can change the direction. This is one area where the fact that you have so many different selves inside each self is identified with a different desire. This is one area where that actually works to your advantage. If you didn’t have a single self, you wouldn’t be able to step back from it. You wouldn’t be able to change it. You’d just be stuck with what you had. But the fact that you can step back and take on other identities means you can step out of the parts of the mind, or the voices in the mind, or the habits of the mind that you don’t like, and replace them with better ones. See where they’re leading and ask yourself, “Is this where I really want to go? If it’s not, here’s an alternative.” So this ability of the mind to determine its future is something that’s really important to work on. The Buddha never said, “Go to the present moment for its own sake.” You go into the present moment because it will have an impact in the future, and you want to make sure that impact is good. When you can see that, that’s when you begin to replace the mind’s ignorance with some knowledge, with some wisdom, remembering that it’s because of our ignorance that we suffer. We do what we want without thought for the future, and then we suffer. And we wonder why. It’s because we’re not looking at cause and effect, and we’re not giving the mind a place where it can stay and look consistently enough to see what causes lead to what effects. But when you can see the connections, that’s when you realize there are things you can do to improve the mind, to improve yourself, so your mind is a better mind to live in, and you’re a better person to be around.

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