Intelligent Conviction (outdoors)

July 21, 2019

When we practice meditation, we have to start with conviction. Traditionally, conviction means conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. But the meaning of his awakening didn’t stop with him. As he said, he gained awakening from his own efforts. He developed qualities in his mind that we all have to some extent, the difference being simply that he developed them to the ultimate degree. So this event has a meaning both for the world we live in and for us as individuals. For the world, it means we live in a world where somebody has already been able to find an end to suffering through his own efforts. There are some forms of Buddhism where they don’t teach that. They teach that the Buddha was enlightened by previous Buddhas. It wasn’t through his own efforts. He needed help. In a world like that, you’d have to run around getting help from other beings. But here you don’t. It’s something that you can do yourself. And that’s the second extension of the meaning of the Buddha’s awakening and what it means about you. You have within you the potentials. As the Buddha said, he depended on qualities of resolution, heedfulness, and ardency. These are things we have to some extent in some areas of our lives. What he did was he applied them to solving the problem of suffering, looking for the cause inside his own mind, and developed those qualities to the ultimate degree. Through this practice of meditation, here we are following in the paths of the Buddha, following the path that he took, that he worked so hard to find. So we’re in a good place. The problem is, as we settle down with the breath, there are parts of the mind that say, “Well, there’s something out there that’s worth thinking about now. Here’s all this empty space for a whole hour. We have time to think about this, that, things in the past, plans for the future.” And there’s another part of the mind that says, “Being sitting around like this very quietly, there’s nothing really intelligent about that. You’re not showing any cleverness, any creativity.” That’s a big misunderstanding right there. To get the mind quiet requires a lot of understanding about the mind. You think about all the accomplishments that human beings have done outside, building bridges over huge bodies of water, building huge, tall buildings, enormous domes, sending rockets up to the moon, out into outer space, beyond the inner planets. But the people who do that are still suffering. In many cases, they never learned about their own minds. They lived with their minds, they wanted happiness, but they couldn’t always guarantee that their actions would be in line with their desire for happiness. In fact, oftentimes they found themselves creating their own suffering. So the accomplishments are not really all that amazing. It’s just bigger and more stuff outside, whereas the big problem inside the mind doesn’t get solved. Here the Buddha solved the big problem in his mind. If he could have, he would have solved it in everybody else’s, but it turns out it’s not the kind of problem you can solve that way. It’s caused because of our own lack of knowledge, our own lack of skill. The word avicca means both that, both lack of knowledge and lack of skill. One of the skills, of course, is getting the mind to be still. As the Buddha said, “If you really want to be in control of your mind, you have to think when you want to think and not think when you don’t want to think, and also have the wisdom to figure out when it really is worth thinking and when it’s not.” The mind that thinks all the time is not necessarily a very intelligent mind. You have to learn how to see there are times when the mind needs to be quiet in order to see itself. Then it needs to understand itself in order to get itself quiet to at least some extent. So in the very beginning of the meditation, it’s good to remember that you are, in the Buddha’s words, “putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.” In other words, all your desires that have to do with the world, you put them aside right now. And you see that this greed and distress over the world is not necessarily all that intelligent. It’s getting in the way of your understanding of yourself. There was a woman one time who came to Wat Thammasat in Thailand. She wanted to study meditation with the Chan Fung for two weeks. But then, at the end of the second day, she came to say goodbye. She was going to go home. He said, “What’s going on? I thought you were going to stay for two weeks.” She said, “I can’t help but think about my family at home. Who’s going to cook for them? Who’s going to sew for them? Who’s going to clean the house? Who’s going to look after them?” He said, “Tell yourself that you’ve died. You’ll have to look after themselves one way or another.” And so with that thought, she was able to stay on for the two weeks. Every time she started thinking about the house, she said, “Well, I’ve died. It doesn’t have any meaning anymore.” So when you sit down to meditate, you have to have the same attitude. It’s as if you’ve died from the world. Any thoughts that have to do with the world in the past, or the world in the future, or the world in the present moment, they don’t have any meaning. Because when you’re dying, the world has no meaning. What you’ve got is simply the state of your mind in the present moment. And if it hasn’t been straightened out, it could cause a lot of trouble. If you start thinking about how much you’re going to miss your family, you could be reborn as a child of some member in your family. And if they decide they’re not going to have any kids, you might end up being a dog in the family. If you start missing this, that, and the other thing, that’s where you’re going to go. And if you don’t have any control over the mind, it’ll grab hold of anything. In a moment like that, no matter how much people around you may try to tell you what to do, try to be helpful, there come points where you’re just beyond their help. When I was living in Thailand, there were times I had to stay in Bangkok. And in Bangkok I stayed at a monastery that had a lot of funerals. Traditions in Thailand is often that when someone dies, you print a book to be handed out at the funeral. Usually a book about the Dhamma, although sometimes a book is about other things. And if there had been enough time, they would put a little history of the person who passed away in the front of the book. And you’d read the histories, and they followed a common pattern. People were born, they got an education, they got married, they had children, they had a job, or they looked after their children, which was another job. And they started having little problems in terms of illnesses, but at first it wasn’t too bad. But then it got worse and worse and worse until finally the doctors couldn’t help them anymore, no matter what they did. You can’t help but think. What does a person do in a situation like that? The doctors can’t help you anymore. Your family can’t help you anymore. You have to depend on the state of your mind and your ability to keep your mind under control. Because here you are, you’re leaving the body. It’s unpleasant to stay here, but you’re scared of what’s going to happen if you get pushed out. So you need to train the mind so it’s not scared. It realizes it doesn’t have to depend on the body. And it has the resources within it to create a sense of happiness, a sense of well-being, that doesn’t have to depend on anything outside at all. That’s the kind of mind you want. So when you’re thinking these ways, then you begin to realize it really is intelligent to be right here training the mind. If it wanders off the breath, you bring it back. If it wanders off the breath again, you bring it back again. Ten times, a hundred times, you keep bringing it back. That’s intelligence. The thought that just gives in and says, “Well, I might as well think about this,” that’s not intelligent right now. Because your opportunity to train the mind to understand itself doesn’t come all the time. But here it is. You’ve got the opportunity to make the most of it. Settle down with the breath. And you realize if the mind is going to stay with the breath, you have to make it pleasant and interesting. You can do that by thinking about the breath not just as air coming in and out of the lungs, but as the energy that flows through the body, flows through the nerves, flows through the blood vessels. All over the body. You can ask yourself, as you breathe in, where does it feel like you’re holding tension that you don’t need to hold? Or you’re adding tension where you don’t need to add it. Can you let it go? When you breathe out, is there anything you’re holding onto? Is there any part of the body that’s not participating in the breath process? Can you bring it in? Realizing that the more the breath surrounds the whole body, permeates the whole body, the better it’s going to be for the functioning of every organ in the body. That thought right there can make the breath more and more interesting, give you something to do in the present moment, something to do that helps you see the mind. The breath becomes like a mirror for the mind. And you realize that when you can create a sense of well-being like this while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, there’s also the possibility of doing it as you get up, as you move around. There’s no need to breathe in a way that’s not comfortable. Nobody’s forcing you. You can carry this sense of well-being into the world. And when you can carry well-being into the world, it’s a gift not only for yourself, but also a gift to other people. When you’re walking around with a sense of well-being, why would you want to harm anybody? The reason we harm one another is because we’re coming from hunger. But the sense of comfortable breath is very nourishing. It’s very filling, filling in a good way. So what are you hungry for? There may still be some hunger nibbling around the edges, but you’ve got a much greater sense of satisfaction inside, which means that this practice is good not only for you, but also for the people around you. So have some conviction in what you’re doing, even if sometimes discouraging the mind doesn’t settle down the way you want it to. Realize that you’re working on a very crucial skill, a skill that each person needs to master in order not to suffer. So, however long it takes, it doesn’t matter. Just keep on developing that sense of conviction that this is the right intelligent place to be. This is an intelligent thing to be doing. Then keep on doing what’s intelligent. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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