Appropriate Attention

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The mind has a lot of responsibilities. After all, put together this body, this being, and no one has to look after it. The body needs to be fed. The mind needs to be fed. Where are you going to get your food? We live in a world where there’s no food. We’re dangerous. Our sources of food are threatened. We’re threatened. So the mind spends a lot of time looking around, asking, “What to do next? What should I do? What should I do?” When we come to meditate, we try to pare down some of that sense of responsibility. But still, we’re responsible. There are still things we have to do. And we could, if we wanted to, spend the hour just fantasizing about whatever we wanted. But there’s a part of the mind that knows that that’s not a good use of the time. So how do we know what is a good use of the time? This is why we have the Dhamma, why we have a tradition like this. This is the Buddhist gift. You hear so much talk of the traditions handed down from one generation to the next as being oppressive. But that’s not true of all the traditions. Here’s a tradition that basically is giving advice on, “If you want to find true happiness, this is what you should do. This is how you should look at your experience. These are the questions you should ask.” The Buddha, of course, says there are certain answers that you can expect, but a lot of the questions are in generalities or provide a general framework. And then, in the context of our lives, we have to add the details. The big general framework is right view. These are the assumptions we take on, based on the experience of the Buddha and all the noble ones. These are the questions we should ask. There’s mundane right view and there’s transcendent right view. But they grow out of that question, “What will I do that will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” I’m pointing you to the importance of your actions, and that actions follow a certain pattern. If they didn’t follow the pattern, there would be no use in listening to anybody else. If you try one thing today, you get one result. If you try the same thing tomorrow, you get a different result. There would be no useful knowledge to pass on, even for you from one day to the next. But the Buddha saw that there are certain patterns to our actions as to whether they’re going to lead to long-term happiness or long-term pain, long-term well-being or long-term harm. So he set out those patterns as right view. And then appropriate attention takes right view and applies it to what’s actually happening in your life. It asks that question, “What should I do now? What should I say now? What should I think now?” The Buddha is providing you with a framework for approaching the present moment. He’s not saying that the present moment is totally new and fresh and you should be totally new and fresh as you come to it. I mean, you should be observant, you should be lucid, alert. But you should have certain questions in the back of your mind. What is the best course of action now? What’s the wisest course? In daily life, it comes down to what actions are skillful, what states of mind lead to skillful actions, which actions are unskillful, and which states of mind lead to unskillful actions. Skillful actions should be developed; unskillful actions should be abandoned. Notice that right view always has a series of duties associated with it, not just a statement about the world. The Buddha didn’t say, “Everything is inconstant. Just leave it at that.” His observation of inconstancy fits into a framework that’s focused primarily on actions. Which things, when you do them, will lead to very short-term results, and which things will lead to long-term results? That’s where the question of inconstancy comes in. When we’re sitting and meditating, we focus more of our attention on the formidable truths. And again, it’s a matter of appropriate attention focused on the duties of the truths. Like right now, we’re trying to get the mind to settle down, create a state of right concentration, and that’s something we should develop. If there’s anything that would come up and interfere with the concentration, we should let it go. Notice your likes and dislikes don’t get involved, or they shouldn’t get involved, which means that the mind is having trouble settling down. You don’t just say, “Well, it’s obviously not a good night for meditation. Pack it in. Do something else.” You realize this is a skill you’ve got to work at. And if, sitting here in a very peaceful place, you still can’t get the mind to settle down, how is it going to be under your control in more difficult situations? So you take this as a challenge. You try to read the situation and figure out what’s keeping the mind from settling down. That is an application of appropriate attention. There’s an assumption there always is a skillful choice. What is that choice right now? And you look for it. This is where trial and error come in, and you have to learn from experience. But the basic framework is always the same. This is why the Buddha’s teachings have lasted for such a long time. He saw the structure of consciousness. He saw the patterns of action. He saw the types of questions that give good results when you ask them and answer them, and the types of questions that don’t. That was the framework that he passed down. So this question the mind always has, “What should I do now?” He provides an answer for it. This is why the Dhamma is so good for the mind, so right for the mind, because it answers your burning question. You’ve got these responsibilities. How do you handle them? For the sake of happiness, it’s worth the effort that goes into it. So the Buddha doesn’t waste his time talking about totally irrelevant things. After all, he said he learned a lot of things in the course of his awakening that he didn’t talk about. Why? Because it wouldn’t help with the solution to this problem. Why are we suffering? What are we doing that’s creating the suffering, and what can we do to stop it? And he’s very critical of teachers who would engage in the question what he called “bombast.” Flowery words, beautiful sentiments, but not offering anything that could be applied to that question, “What should I do next? What is the wisest thing to do next?” So we should take his teachings and apply them right here. As he said, the best response to listening to the Dhamma is first to apply appropriate attention, which means asking yourself, “How does what I’ve learned in this Dhamma apply to how I’m creating suffering right now, or how I can put an end to it?” And then you practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. In other words, you don’t let your preferences get in the way. If you see a task that needs to be done, you do it. That’s how you can become your own best friend in the path.

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