Focused on Your Duties (outdoors)

July 18, 2021

When we meditate, we focus on the present moment, not because it’s a wonderful moment, but it’s a moment where we have to think about our duties. And this is where the duties get performed. What duties we have? Well, as the Buddha said, if you want to put an end to suffering, that means you have the choice of taking on the duties or not. But if you want to put an end to suffering, you have to comprehend suffering, what it is. You have to abandon its cause, develop the path so you can realize the cessation of suffering. Those are your duties, if you accept them. So where does suffering happen? Where can you see it clearly enough so you can comprehend it? You can think about suffering in the past, but if you really want to comprehend it, you have to watch it happening in the present moment. The same thing with craving, which is the cause of suffering. It’s not the sort of thing that you can abandon ahead of time. Or you can think back, “I abandoned my cravings in the past.” Those cravings have already done their work. It’s the cravings in the present moment that you have to be responsible for. These are the ones you abandon. The qualities of the path, you develop those in the present moment, too. All the work needs to be done right here. And so we focus on the present moment because we don’t know how much time we have. This is why when the Buddha teaches about being in the present moment, we’re losing our attention in the present moment. It’s always in the context of mindfulness of death, the realization that there are duties that need to be done, and you don’t know how much time you have to do them. You could die at any time. And there’s a big challenge you’re going to face at death. If you think the sufferings of daily life are bad, think of what it’s going to be like then. But it’s the same process. The craving is going to be the problem again. The image the Buddha gives is of a fire in one house. The wind blows and the fire latches on to the wind and sets fire to the house next door. As beings latch on to their craving, the craving takes them to a new life. So you can imagine what it’s going to be like when you get so you can’t stay in this body anymore and you’re going to have to leave. The craving will be very strong to find a new place to go. And if you’re not careful, you’re going to latch on to the wrong cravings. Ideally, you don’t want to latch on to any cravings at all. That requires a lot of skill. But even just the skill of being able to choose your cravings wisely so you can go to a good place where you can continue practicing, that requires that you put a lot of time in to get to know your mind and understand the various ways in which craving has fooled you in the past. You say, “Over there is going to be good.” You go there and it may be okay, but it’s not as good as you thought it was. Then you say, “No, over here is going to be good.” You go there. This is why this is called the wandering on. We just keep going on, on, on. The craving goes along, as the Buddha said, as our companion, telling us where to go, what to do. We’ve believed it all along. But if you want to protect your happiness, both in this life and as you go to other ones, you really do have to be careful about which cravings you choose to go with and which ones you say no to. So to get to know your cravings, you’ve got to get the mind quiet. That too is a kind of craving, but it’s a good one. It’s simply a question of learning how to be skillful in bringing it about, realizing what a quiet mind is like, how you can get it there, how you can keep it there. You give it a good place to stay. This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath. We think of the breath energies in the body. How are they flowing right now? You start with the in-and-out breathing, which is easy to see, and then you ask yourself, “When you breathe in, how far does the energy go? When you breathe out, how far does it go?” You should be able to breathe in and out, feeling it everywhere in the body. So you notice if there are any patterns of tension anyplace. Those are getting in the way of the free flow of the energy. Allow those to relax. Then you get a sense that it feels really good to be here. There’s a sense of ease that goes with the breath, but you have to make sure you don’t drop the breath and just wallow in the ease. You’re trying to give rise to the ease, but you don’t want to fall for it. Sometimes you hear it said, “If you watch out for concentration, you’re going to get stuck on the pleasure.” Well, the problem with getting stuck is, one, when you drop the breath as your anchor, when you’ve lost your mindfulness. You just drift around in a nice, pleasant cloud. That doesn’t go anywhere. The other problem is when the mind has settled down and you just want to keep it quiet. You don’t want to pose any questions. But those two problems are easy to solve. The big problem is if the mind can’t get into concentration at all. You’re going to go looking for your pleasure in other places, and you’ll get blinded by your craving again. It’s only when the mind is in concentration that you can see things clearly. All the background noise has settled down. So don’t be afraid of getting the mind concentrated. Just learn how to use the sense of well-being wisely. Once you have this spot in the present moment where you’re anchored, then if other thoughts come in, you can question them. Your first response, of course, is just not to get involved at all. But you find yourself every now and then slipping off. You have to ask why. What was the appeal of that thought? What was the appeal of this thought? You are sitting here, and everything is perfectly still, perfectly calm, and you can still fall for random cravings. Why is that? Which part of the mind is lying to another part of the mind? You want the mind to be very clear. What the allure of those thoughts is. In other words, what do you find attractive about them? Then be honest with yourself about the drawbacks. If you follow that kind of thinking, where would it take you? Anywhere good? If not, why go with it? You’ve got something good here with a breath. Why do you treat it so casually? Why do you treat it with so much disrespect? It’s in this way that you’ll dig down and get to know your defilements. Because those are the things that get in the way here in the present moment and later on in life as you’re approaching death. They’re the same defilements, the same hindrances, causing the same problems. It’s simple that now you’re healthy and strong enough to be able to see things clearly and learn about their reasoning and to learn how to see through their reasoning by coming up with better reasons of your own for not going with them. That way, later on in life, as you’re approaching death and the same cravings come up, you won’t fall for their stupid reasons again. Because you realize you’ve seen through that. So each time you overcome a distraction, each time you overcome a hindrance in your mind as you’re sitting here getting the mind concentrated, think of it as good practice. Because you’re going to face the same kinds of hindrances, the same kinds of distractions, as you’re dying. And those are the ones that lead people astray. You’re staying there focused on the breath and all of a sudden the memory of something horrible that somebody did to you way back in the past comes up. You suddenly find yourself going back into that state of becoming. And if you happen to die at that moment, that’s where you’d go, in line with that idea. Maybe to get revenge, maybe to go back and relive the issue, try it out in a new way. Neither of which is going to be very helpful. So you want to get practice in being on top of your distractions all the time, not letting yourself get fooled by them. Ultimately, when you clear them all away, then you can be with a state of concentration. You realize that this too is a state of becoming. It too depends on craving and clinging. And if you want something better than this, you have to look into this too. See what it is that you’re doing to keep this going and ask yourself, “Is there something that’s quieter, something that’s less fabricated?” But before you get there, you first have to learn how to do it. Do battle with all the other things that have in the past pulled you away from concentration. Make sure you know all of their tricks and deceits. Because at the very least, if you die in a good state of concentration, you’re going to go to a good place. You may not gain ultimate release, but at least you’ve got a good chance of continuing your practice. If you can see through your attachment here, if you can understand what it is that keeps the mind trapped in the process of fabrication, the better. But in every case, the work is done right here. And if it doesn’t get done right here, it’s not going to get done. Death in the background is our topic of recollection. It’s not the case that when you’re doing recollection of death, you just think, “Death, death, death, die, die, die.” All you have to do is remind yourself that there’s important work that needs to be done. The process of death is not something you just ride through passively. You’re going to be playing an active role. You’ve got to prepare. Preoccupation is not so much death itself but the things that need to be done, what your duties are. Comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, realize its cessation by developing the path. And as long as you keep with those duties all the time, that kind of recollection of death, whether you think death or don’t think death, the fact that you are on top of your duties and don’t let them lapse. That’s the whole point. Our problem is that we follow the eightfold path sometimes and we go off on a side road someplace else. The Buddha’s images of someone who’s been traveling along a highway with their cart, everything is nice and safe, and then they decide to go off into a side road that leads them up a mountain. It’s unpaved, uneven, and they end up breaking their axle, breaking their wheel. They can’t get back on the road because they’ve destroyed what they had. Or if you do get back on the road, but you go off every side road you find, you’re never going to get to the end of the road. You keep finding another side road, another side road. It’s like those forest lanes up in the National Forest in the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. One forest lane leads to another forest lane until it leads to another forest lane. You can go for miles, get further and further away from the main road. So stay on the main road all the time. Remind yourself how important it is to be right here, doing your work all the time. Of course, it’s work in a sense of well-being. The breath is easy. The things the Buddha has you think about are things that are pleasant, noble, good to do. He’s asking you to work all the time, but he’s giving you rewards all the time as well. The path doesn’t save all. It’s rewards for the end. You can sit here breathing in a way that feels really content right now. And you’re doing your work. Just make sure you do it as continuously as you can. And that will count as mindfulness of death. And as the Buddha said, when it’s done right, mindfulness of death leads to the doubtless. So understand where your focus should be and get to work.

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