Simple Things (outdoors)

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The Buddha was a real genius in that he could take things that are very close, very ordinary, and observe them very carefully, until he was able to get enough knowledge that he was able to put an end to his defilements and find total release. He didn’t have to look far away, and he didn’t have to look at complicated things. He looked at things that are simple, but when you look at them very carefully you begin to see that they have lots of ramifications and give you a much better understanding of your mind and your body, the kind of understanding that you can really put to use to put an end to suffering. Simple things like generosity, the act of giving a gift. When he stated the principles of mundane right view, the very first thing he said was, “There is what is given,” which sounds so obvious that you wonder why he stated it. But it actually had a different meaning in those days. There were people who said that the act of giving a gift didn’t have any meaning because outside forces forced the donor to give the gift. The donor had no choice. It was either material forces or the state of the stars or the gods. But because that person had no choice, there was no merit in the gift. The universe was preordained so that that item had to pass from one person’s hands to another’s. There were others who said it was because of the donor that the gift had no meaning. At death, the donor was just going to disappear. There was nothing left. So no matter how much help you give to anybody, it’s all going to disappear. So why bother? So when the Buddha said, “There is what is given,” he was making two statements. One is that when you give a gift, you do have a choice. You could give it or you could not give it, but you decide to give it. You overcome your greed, you overcome your selfishness. So in that sense, the act of giving has merit. The second point he was making was that when people die, they don’t get annihilated. There’s something that passes on to another life. And so when you help a person, sometimes the benefits can go on for a long time to come, both for you and for the recipient. So the act of giving a gift is proof of freedom of choice. It’s proof of the worth of individuals. So when you think about it, you realize that there are a lot of lessons to be learned, and there are more as well. King Vasundhati one time came to see the Buddha and asked him where a gift should be given. He’d heard Brahmins say that gifts should be given to Brahmins, and Jains say that gifts should be given to Jains. So he probably assumed that the Buddha would say, “Give to Buddhists.” But the Buddha didn’t say that. He said, “Give where you feel inspired.” In other words, you have total freedom of choice in where you give a gift. Then the king went on to ask, “When a gift is given, where does it bear great fruit?” And the Buddha said, “Well, that’s a different question.” And he went on to explain it. There are different explanations, and the Canon showed that there are many factors involved in determining the merit of a gift. One is your motivation. One is your attitude while you’re giving. Another is the gift itself. Another is the recipient in terms of your motivation. He said the lowest motivation is the hope that you’re going to get this back. That’s the law of karma. It’s not a bad motivation, but it’s the lowest of the good ones. Higher than that is the simple thought that giving is good. Higher than that is the thought, “I have plenty of things, more than I have than enough. It’s not that right that I don’t give to people who don’t have enough.” When you give a sense of serenity, gratification, joy arises. Higher than that is what’s called the act of giving as an ornament for the mind. In other words, it’s just a natural expression of the goodness of the mind without any thought about what you’re going to get back in return. So the simple act of giving can have lots of different meanings depending on your original motivation. The same with your attitude while you give. If you give disrespectfully, give without empathy, because if nothing much is going to happen to this, you’re just throwing it away. There’s not going to be much merit in that gift. But if you have empathy for the recipient, you respect the recipient, you give this, the Buddha says, attentively, with the idea that something important will come of this, then there’s going to be a lot of merit. As for the actual gift itself, the important thing is that you don’t harm yourself by giving the gift. In other words, you don’t spend so much on the gift that you’re actually going to hurt yourself financially. And you don’t hurt the recipient. There are certain gifts that, say, for example, for monks are not inappropriate because the monks, if they use them, they’d be breaking the rules. And then finally there’s the recipient, him or herself. The Buddha says the best is someone who’s free of passion, aversion, or delusion, or is practicing to put an end to passion, aversion, and delusion. So when you take this simple act of giving something and you really look at it carefully, you begin to see that there are a lot of lessons you can learn about your own mind in terms of your motivation, your attitude, what you anticipate out of your actions. And this makes you more careful in what you do and say and think. For example, with your words. We know the basic principles of right speech. No telling a lie, no harsh speech, no idle chatter, no divisive speech. But you should look at the act of speaking in the same way that you look at the act of giving a gift. What is your motivation? When you’re talking to somebody, what is your attitude towards them? If your attitude shows any disdain or any contempt, they’re not going to want to listen to your words. If, when you have criticism to offer, you offer it with respect, with sympathy for the person, they will much more likely pick that up and use it well. So when you look carefully at your speech, there’s a lot to learn about your mind, a lot to learn about your attitude towards the people around you, and what kind of attitudes really are healthy and which ones are not. And the same with looking at your breath. The breath is something that comes in and out who knows how many times in the course of a day. We take it for granted because it can go on automatic pilot. But it’s only when we stop to think what’s actually going on in the body when you breathe in, what’s going on when you breathe out, and you look more and more carefully, you begin to see a lot of unanticipated things. If you look carefully at the body, you can begin to see that there are breath sensations or sensations that correspond to the in-and-out breath running along the arms, running along the legs, running all around the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. And you can begin to observe the mind. The mind is what relates to the breath. When you begin meditating, it happens all too often that you’re here with the breath, and then you have no idea where you are. You find yourself someplace else. It takes a while, and then you remember, “Oh, I’m supposed to be with my breath,” and then you come back. That shows you’re not careful about observing your own mind, or you haven’t paid enough attention. So pay attention to the breath, pay attention to the mind as it’s trying to stay with the breath, and try to be as observant as you can as to when the mind begins to send signals that it’s about to move, so you can keep it from moving, and how you can breathe in such a way that gives rise to a sense of ease. Once that sense of ease is there, how you can maintain it. Once you maintain it, how you can make it grow. When it’s grown, how you can spread it around the body. These are all things that are mentioned in books here and there, but the reality is right here, right next to you. That’s where you have to learn it. In this way you learn about the body, you learn about the mind, by focusing on things that are really, really basic and really, really close to you. If you take seriously the simple things in life, then the issues of the body and the mind begin to open up. We like to deal in abstractions. We’re far away from the reality of the things we’re thinking about. As a result, there are a lot of things we miss. It’s when you’re willing to look carefully at things right here, right in front of your nose, that you can see what’s going on and you can really begin to understand your mind. Because everything you’re going to experience has an element of intention from the mind. The more carefully you focus on simple things like this, the more clearly you’ll be able to see, “Oh, this is the mind’s intentional input. And if I change the intentional input, this is what changes things I’m experiencing.” Then you can ask yourself, “Well, what kind of changes are best?” We’re not here just passively observing what’s coming and going, letting it come, letting it go. We’ve got to decide which things are unreliable. Which things are reliable that we have to let go. Which things are reliable that if they’re not there, we have to give rise to them. And when they are there, we have to make them grow, maintain them. So by looking at things that are close to you, you learn an awful lot. John Foon calls this the grass of the gate, the images of cattle in a corral. When the gate of the corral is open, they go running out into the meadow to eat the grass. It turns out there’s grass right there next to the gate, and they run right past it. When you’re dealing with things that are far away, it’s hard to observe things clearly. So you want to deal with things that are simple and up close. And that’s when you learn the most important lessons of the mind. After all, what was the Buddha doing on the night of his awakening? He was watching his breath. Something very simple. His breath is no different from your breath right now. What is different is the amount of attention he paid to what was going on and his ability to analyze what he could see right here in front of his eyes. So you can make that difference too, if you want. Commit yourself to doing the good things that may seem simple. But it’s in doing good things that it’s easy to observe your mind. If you want to observe your mind when the mind is thinking all sorts of jealous thoughts or angry thoughts, it’s not a pleasant thing to observe. You’re going to want to look away. But if you get the mind engaged in doing good things, like speaking well in line with the principles of right speech, being generous, getting to know the breath, then it’s good to watch the mind in those states. You like watching the mind when it’s doing something good. And you can learn an awful lot about what’s going on right here, right now. And that’s the kind of knowledge that can really make a difference.

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