Past, Future, & Present

December 27, 2022

For all that we focus on the present moment as we meditate, the Buddha mentions that fact very rarely in the canon. And when he does, it’s in the context of mindfulness of death. We know that once we’re born, we’re going to die. And the question is, are we ready? For most of us, the answer is no. So you have to focus on doing what you can to get ready. And where do you do that? You do that right here, right now. So as you’re focusing on the present moment, there’s a question about the future in the back of the mind. You’re doing this because you know you have to get ready. There’s work to be done. You don’t just enjoy the present moment or accept the present moment. Of course, you start out by accepting what’s here, but then you realize, there are potentials here. You want to know what you can do with them. Because what you do with the mind now is going to determine where it goes. This time around, the last time around, you died and were born. You’re pretty lucky you made it to the human realm. This is a realm where we can’t practice. Your first taste of awakening, there’s no guarantee where you’re going to go next time around. And what happens at death? The Buddha says it’s like a house on fire. And a flame leaps out from that house. It’s carried by the wind to the house next door. He said, in the same way, the mind goes with its craving, clings to its cravings, feeds on its cravings. Just in the same way that the fire feeds off the wind. You know what fire and wind are like. They can switch directions very quickly. And they’re pretty blind. And our cravings are pretty blind, too. And we’re often blind about our cravings. We have an urge to do something. We really don’t know why. And we’re blind right here, right now, to see what’s going on. To bring some knowledge to this whole question of why there’s craving, why it causes suffering, and what you can do about it so it doesn’t have to cause suffering. The role of mindfulness in all of this is to keep in mind that there are good qualities you can develop in the mind. They can be developed. And if they’re not there yet, you should work at developing them. And if they are there, you have to maintain them. Just because you attain concentration once doesn’t mean you’re going to be able to attain it again. So when you’ve got something good, you try to keep it going. So even though we’re focused on the present moment, the past and the future are involved. We remember from the past where we want to keep the mind focused, what questions we should bring to the mind when it is focused. And all the lessons we’ve learned from our experience of meditating. When the mind hasn’t settled down, what can you do to make it settle down? When it does settle down, how do you maintain it? And when you maintain it, how do you get the best use out of it? Those are things we learn. And we remember them. So we can bring them to bear here on the present moment. So here we are. How is the breath going right now? Where do you feel it? You might ask, why are we focusing on the breath when the big issue is about death? Well, you focus on the breath because it’s something called a fabrication, a bodily fabrication. There’s an intentional element in the breath. And it’s something you can play with. You learn about other intentions going on in the mind. And those intentions are going to be the ones that shape your cravings. So look at what you can do with something simple like the breath. The Buddha says you can breathe in ways that give rise to a sense of rapture or refreshment. Breathe in ways that give rise to a sense of pleasure or ease. And when you’ve got that sense of pleasure, ease, refreshment, you can let it spread through the body. Because you’re trying to make the present moment a pleasant place to be. The more you enjoy being here, the easier it will be to stay and watch what’s going on in the mind. If you’re uncomfortable being here, you’re going to slip off very quickly. So once there’s a sense of ease with breathing, think of it spreading down the spine, down the legs, over the shoulders, down the arms, all around the torso, all around the head, everywhere in the body. And try to hold that perception in mind. Here again, mindfulness. Remember this perception. Alertness. You watch to see how it’s going. And ardency. You’re trying to do this well. Because you realize if you pay careful attention to what you’re doing here, you begin to see the mind in relationship to the breath. This question was raised at a Zoom meeting the other day. We talk so much about the breath as being the vehicle. Well, the reason it is the vehicle to awakening is not because you’re going to be just watching the breath and that’s it. When you’re watching the breath, the mind is right there. Feelings are right there. Mental qualities that help or hinder you are right there. All the things you need to know are right around the breath. Four frames of reference. One convenient location. So you want to see the influence that feelings have because feelings will shape your cravings. Say at the moment of death, there’s a fair amount of pain. You can react to that in lots of different ways. One is if you don’t have any experience with concentration, the only pleasure you can think of that would be an escape from pain would be sensual pleasure. So you develop sensual craving. Or as you see, you can no longer stay in this body. You’re going to continue finding a body someplace. So craving for becoming, taking on an identity in a particular world of experience. When things get really oppressive, you may think that you just want to get obliterated. That’s craving for non-becoming. But that obliterated state doesn’t mean that you are not in a world of experience. It’s just that it’s a very snuffed-out kind of world. Because you haven’t understood the processes that would prevent the mind, that actually get the mind to take on becoming again. And you haven’t learned how to uproot them in the proper way. So you just keep coming back, coming back. Pulled by sensuality, pulled by the desire for becoming, pulled by the desire for obliteration. These are the big things you’ve got to watch out for. And so when you get to know feeling really well, feeling is the basis for a lot of craving. And you learn how to tame your cravings around the feeling. On the one hand, you learn, as the Buddha said, how not to be overcome by pleasure. You do that by getting the mind into concentration. Because you notice, as the breath gets comfortable, it’s really easy to slip off of the breath and go in for the comfort. Then you kind of wallow around in the comfort for a while, and then you lose your focus. So you have to be very careful. Even though there’s comfort, even though there’s a sense of ease. And it can be pretty intense sometimes. You’re going to keep your focus on the breath. That sense of refreshment is going to help the body and help the mind. It can do it on its own. You don’t have to get excited about it. Just think of it spreading, spreading, spreading. But you maintain your focus on the breath. And that’s one way of not getting overcome by pleasure. As for not getting overcome by pain, there will be pains coming up in the meditation. You sit here for a long period of time. You sit here long enough, there are bound to be pains in the legs, pains in the hips, pains in the back. The longer you sit, over time, the body will adjust. You can actually reroute the blood. But before that happens, there’s going to be a fair amount of pain as the blood gets pushed into the little capillaries. And the first step there, of course, is not to focus on the pain. Focus on the parts of the body that you can make comfortable. And again, when they’re comfortable, you think of that sense of ease spreading through the body, going right through the pain to dissolve away. Any patterns of tension or tightness you may build up as walls around the pain. Because we do have that tendency to subconsciously try to protect ourselves from the pain spreading by putting up a wall. But that wall is tension. And that becomes just as oppressive as the pain. So breathe through it. Think of the breath going through the pain and down the legs, through the pain, wherever it is, and out. Don’t let it stop at the pain. And then when you’re ready, you can focus in on the sensation of pain itself and ask yourself, why does this sensation have to feel oppressive to the mind? And you’ll discover that a lot of it has to do with your perceptions around the pain. That the pain is trying to hurt you. Or that it has a big shape and it’s blocking that part of the body. You have to question those perceptions. Are they really true? A lot of our perceptions around pain are ones that we built up when we were children and understood very little about what was going on. Even though we understand pain better now, still these things linger in the subconscious. So you want to ferret them out. And you do that by asking questions. Is the pain the same thing as your knee? Is the pain the same thing as your hip? Well, not really. The hip sensations are one thing. The sensations are something else. Can you make a distinction between the two of them? Or is the pain one solid block of pain? Well, no. It’s actually moments of pain that come and then disappear, come and disappear. Hold them when they come. Don’t think of them coming at you. Think of them simply arising and going away, arising and going away from you. See what that perception does. When you’re active in analyzing the pain, it holds a lot less fear for you and the mind gets less and less inclined to be overcome by the pain. That’ll be a really useful skill to have if there’s any pain in the process of dying. And then you can look at the mind as it relates to the breath. Your awareness is right here. When it’s right here, then you can see when greed arises, when anger arises, when lust arises, when fear arises. You can see it in its minor stages, when it’s still quite small. And it’s a lot easier to do something about it when it just begins going like that. So by staying with the breath, you’re in an ideal position to see. You’re in an ideal position to see all the things going on in the mind. It’s like wanting to see the animals in the savannah in Africa. You don’t have to travel all around the savannah. You just go to the watering hole. And in the course of a day, all the animals will have to go there. So as you stay with the breath, you learn about the mind. You learn about your relationship to feelings. You begin to see how craving can form around the feelings. You master your feelings so that the craving doesn’t get out of control. And then you begin to realize that as you do this, you’re developing good mental qualities. You’re learning to get past what the Buddha calls the hindrances. Sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, or doubt. And instead you develop qualities he calls the factors of awakening, or factors for awakening. Mindfulness, the ability to analyze what’s going on in your mind. Persistence, rapture, refreshment. Calm, concentration, equanimity. And you learn how to foster these good qualities. So this is the one convenient location where all these things come together. And as long as you’re mindful, i.e. keeping in mind the lessons you want to learn. Also keeping in mind the fact that there are dangers ahead in the future, so you’ve got to prepare for them. If you’re alert to what you’re doing, and the results you’re getting, and if you’re ardent, trying to do this well so that when the inevitable comes, you’re ready for it, then you’re getting the most out of the present moment. Because you don’t take the present moment as an end in and of itself. The reason we focus on it is because our intentions are happening right here. And you want to see them, how you have your intentions around the way you breathe, how you have your intentions around feelings that come and go, good or bad. Your intentions toward the mind itself. This is where they happen. You can’t do anything about them. You can’t do anything about past intentions. They’re done. And future intentions aren’t here yet. But you can prepare and train the mind so that it’s more and more likely to develop good intentions in the future by focusing on what intentions you feed right now. Just watch out for the voices in the mind that will pull you away. Sometimes anger comes on. And at first you may be fighting it. But then it says, well, you know you’re going to give it. So give in now. Or it may go away for a while, but it’s going to come back. You won’t be able to get rid of it until you give in to it. Don’t fall for that one. There’s no way of getting rid of anger by giving in to it. The more you give in to it, the more you nurture it, the more it’s going to come back. So you want to have a good, solid foundation. You want to have a good, solid foundation with the concentration so that you’re not so tempted to go with these things. And you’re not so likely to fall for their arguments, for their persuasion. When you can learn how to fight them off now, you’re in a much better position. If they come on as the end of life approaches, you can fight them off then, too. So harden, alert, mindful. Past, present, and the future all focused in here on what you’re doing right now for the sake of the future, but also for the sake of the present moment. You’re going to have a pleasant abiding here. So when you realize that we’re not just here to hang out, we’re here because there’s work to be done. It’s good work, too. Important work. Then you can get the most out of what the present moment has to offer.

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