Keep Your Eyes on the Road

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Jon Foong used to say that his favorite people to teach were the merchants from the market, people who didn’t have that much background in Buddhist studies or reading Dharma books. He simply knew that training the mind would be a good thing. They would come and they didn’t have a lot of preconceived notions about what the training had to be. They had no preconceived notions about what the training had to be. They would come back and ask, “What do I do next?” That way they kept their feet on the ground, walking on the path. The story that Ajahn Put used to tell about his time with Ajahn Tso. He was a novice for Ajahn Tso when he was young. He would sit in as Ajahn Tso was teaching meditation to laypeople. He’d be pretty short and to the point. He’d tell people to focus on the word “buddho.” If people asked, “What does buddho mean?” he’d say, “Don’t ask, just do it.” And what’s going to happen when I repeat “buddho”? “Don’t ask, just do it.” So some of them would go off and do it. Then they’d come back and talk about the results they were getting. And if it was obvious that it was not right, he’d say, “No, this is not right. You’ve got to do this and this instead.” And if it was right, he wouldn’t say that it was right. He’d say, “Well, this is what you do next.” Because after all, we’re in search of right. We can’t say that we’re starting out right. We’re heading in the right direction, we hope. That’s the duty of the teacher is to make sure you’re headed in that right direction. But where you are right now is not yet right. We talk about aiming for stream entry, which is the first level of awakening. Well, the stream itself is the Noble Eightfold Path. All those right factors from right view through right concentration. So we’re working at right view, working at right resolve, and all the factors leading to right concentration. If we had arrived at rightness, we’d be at stream entry. The image of the stream is that once you hit it, it inevitably flows to the Daedalus, the first fruit of stream entry. And from there, after that, it flows inevitably to full awakening. We read about stream entry and we have lots of preconceived notions about it, but it’s best to put those notions aside. One of the most debilitating is when you read about the fetters that are caught at stream entry and you think that you’ve got to cut them. That won’t do the job. Those fetters are pretty high-flown things, and you don’t cut them. The experience of stream entry is what cuts them, that experience of the Daedalus. It shows you, for instance, that the five aggregates can’t be you, because there are no aggregates in that experience, yet there is an experience. They show you that what the Buddha taught was right. There really is a Daedalus experience that can be touched inside, so you end your doubts about the Buddha, because you have proof. Next, for attachment to precepts, habits, and practices, you realize that simply by following the rules, it’s not enough. It’s going to require an act of discernment. It’s especially important to realize that that attachment to precepts and practices doesn’t mean that you let go of precepts and practices or have no precepts and practices. You simply have the right attitude to following them. You do them and then you reflect. And it’s in the reflection that you develop your discernment. But in the doing, you’re going to develop a lot of character. It’s all too easy, reading Buddhism in the books, to think that it’s a topic to be figured out, figuring out how there is no self, for instance. Some people say, “We just know what stream entry is.” People who do well at school tend to think, “Well, this is just another topic like we’ve done at school. Figure it out and you’ll get ahead.” But it’s not a subject to be figured out. It’s not just a subject to be figured out. It’s a training to which you submit yourself. You take the principles that the Buddha taught and you commit yourself to doing them. And you’re training not only the mind, but also the heart. Remember, the Pali word for mind, citta, also means heart. In a sense, we think of it in terms of your character and the quality, the goodness of your heart. After all, in the eightfold path, it’s not just sitting and meditating or trying to figure out right view. There’s right speech, right action, right livelihood. And all these factors are often expressed in a negative way. In other words, the things you don’t do. The Buddha also teaches the positive things that you try to develop in your speech, in your actions, in your livelihood. For instance, with right speech, you don’t simply avoid telling lies. You try to find the truth and tell the truth. You don’t simply avoid divisive speech. You actually try to bring people into harmony. What this means is you don’t just say what you want to say or feel like saying. You have to ask yourself, “What I’m about to say, is this going to help the harmony of the group, or is it going to disturb it?” You act in ways, speak in ways, to actively promote harmony. Commit yourself to doing that. You don’t simply avoid harsh speech. You actually speak in ways that show respect. You develop your character in this way. And as you’re committed to developing your character, you reflect on the results that come and what you learn about yourself. Because you’re going to be seeing that you have a lot of habits that are really not in line with the path. There are a lot of people who look down in the vinaya at the monks’ roles, thinking, “Well, it’s just rules to make the monks seem polite, make a good impression on the laypeople.” But they’re there to train the hearts and minds of the monks as well. And it’s good for laypeople to look into them. Like that issue on respect. You speak respectfully when people criticize you, you still show respect to them. Because you never know. Even someone who you don’t think much of may have some insights into what’s wrong with your behavior, and they’re certainly not going to tell you if you show them disrespect. As John Fung used to say, “A sign of intelligence is an attitude of respect.” When you open yourself up to other people’s criticism, think of that image in the Canon. Other people who criticize you are pointing out treasure to you, areas where you can improve yourself. The same with the principle of idle speech. You don’t simply avoid idle chatter. You’re trying to think about what would be a useful thing to say now. If there’s nothing you can think of that would really be useful, you don’t say anything. You’re quiet. But you’re trying to be helpful. We’re not here just to do what we want. That was one of Ajaan Swartz’s criticisms of people, the people who simply think of doing something and then just do it because they want to do it. If you’re going to practice the Dharma, you have to filter things before you say them, filter things before you do them. Not only to avoid unskillful things, but also to promote skillful things, skillful qualities, and the community where you are. So as we live together here, think of it as part of the path, learning how to be truthful and respectful, harmonious, useful to other people. You commit yourself to doing the path, and that’s how you get to the higher attainments. You have to keep your eye on the road. You can’t anticipate the larger attainments before they come. It’s like going to the Grand Canyon. You approach the Grand Canyon from the south, and it’s just flat land, scrubby trees here and there, nothing at all to indicate that there is a Grand Canyon anywhere nearby. In fact, historically they’ve shown that there were expeditions that went through northern Arizona and just happened to miss the Grand Canyon just by a few miles, because it’s not the sort of thing you can see from far away. It’s a hole in the ground. But you follow the road, you stay with the road, and that’s how you get there. You don’t get there by anticipating what it’s going to look like. You get there by following the road. The road includes everything from right view, the right concentration, going through the precepts, going through the principles of right speech, right action, and right livelihood. When all of those become right, both in terms of your understanding and in terms of the qualities of the heart, that’s when the path comes together and it becomes the stream. So, as we’ve said, the factors for stream entry include finding a person of integrity. Not just somebody who is book smart, but someone who has integrity. Listen to that person’s dhamma. Listen to the true dhamma from that person, and then develop appropriate attention, which is another way of saying developing right view. So suffering, or stress, and its cause, what you have to do to put an end to its cause. Then practice the dhamma in accordance with the dhamma. Everything from right resolve on through right concentration. It’s all there in the path. Take the Buddha at his word. Keep your feet on the path. Don’t go jumping around looking for another shortcut. The path, as the Buddha described, is the shortest way there. And as you’re following the road of the grand canyon, it may have your doubts, “Is there really such a thing as the grand canyon?” When you arrive at the rim, your doubts are ended. But the only way you’ll be able to do that is to stick with the road. Keep your eye on the road. Don’t go glancing off anyplace else.

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