

How the Tree Leans

August, 8, 2020

Even as we sit here very still, we're on the move. We're sitting on a planet that rotates around its axis, revolves around the Sun. The Sun, in turn, is revolving around the center of the Milky Way. And the Milky Way is on the move, all very fast. We're hurtling through space. So even when we're really still, we're not really still.

The same applies to the mind. You can be sitting here very still with the mind focused on the present moment. But the present moment keeps changing. The present moment you were focused on just a few seconds ago is gone. The mind is leaning in different directions. As the Buddha said, based on the thoughts that you encourage in your mind, it's going to lean in that direction. You bend the mind in a particular direction. It can be skillful or unskillful. So the fact that it's bent is not necessarily bad. You want to bend it in the right direction.

The Buddha gives some examples of what the wrong directions are. Thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of ill will, thoughts of harmfulness: These bend you in the wrong way. You're heading in the wrong direction. Thoughts of renunciation, non-ill will, i.e., goodwill or equanimity, harmlessness, compassion or equanimity: Those bend you in a good direction.

There are the four wrong courses, when you're biased because of favoritism, biased because of antagonism, biased because of delusion, or biased because of fear. Those are directions you don't want to go. Whereas if you develop the treasures of the mind—virtue, conviction, a healthy sense of shame, a healthy sense of compunction, learning, generosity, discernment: These things lean the mind in the right direction. Even more so, there's the noble eightfold path.

Why do you want the mind to lean? Well, think of a tree. There are trees that are leaning over all the time because they've been subjected to so much wind. You go to the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, and at the very edge of the cliff you see these huge juniper trees. They look like they've been blasted for centuries, all leaning over away from the wind. You go up to Powell Point: There are bristlecone pines leaning over very far, almost to the ground. Those have been there for millennia. If you were to cut them, you know exactly which direction they would fall. That's the Buddha's image. If you practice the noble eightfold path, develop the mind in the noble eightfold path, then it's like a tree that leans to the east. No matter how you cut it, it's going to fall to the east. That's a mind that's been consistently on the path.

Our problem is that we're not consistent. Sometimes we're on the path; sometimes we wander off in different directions. It's like a tree that's standing straight up. Some of the branches go north, some of go east, some of them go west, some go south. You don't really know, if someone were to cut that tree, which direction it would fall. You'd have to cut it very carefully if you wanted it to go to the east—you'd have to cut it very carefully to make sure. But the events of life are not necessarily careful. Great shocks can come, hardships—like the lockdown on the pandemic. It's a stress test. If your mind has been heading in all sorts of directions, you don't really know which direction it's going to fall. Particularly at death: That's the big shock. You'd like to have a mind that you can guarantee will fall in the right direction.

Death can come very quickly. Sometimes you don't have your wits about you. Other times it comes so slowly it's worn you down by the time it arrives. So while you're strong enough, you want to develop the qualities of the path and maintain that sense of one direction so that you're not wandering off in lots of different directions all at once.

One of the reasons why we develop concentration is to train the mind to hold on to one direction. Some people think that when you sit in the present moment, you're outside of time. That's not the case. The present moment is moving. It *is* time. And as the mind moves through time, what direction is it going in? It's going into the future for sure, but is it going to a good future or a bad future? That's where you have choice.

That's why the Buddha said it was so important that we realize we *do* have these choices and they really do make a difference. The principle of karma was so important that if members of other sects came to ordain and they were from a sect that denied karma, they had to stay for a long probation to test them—to see if they really had had a change of heart. That's because people who don't want to believe in the power of their actions are hard to trust. They can say anything, do anything, think anything because they think they don't have any real consequences.

I remember reading a piece by someone saying that that's what it means to live in an enlightened age like ours: Realize that there's nobody up there passing judgment on us so we're free to do what we want. Free to be irresponsible, basically. They want to bring that teaching into the Buddhist teachings, where it really doesn't fit. After all, the Buddha says we are responsible for our choices. They do make a difference.

So as you're training your mind, try to teach it to lean in one direction and not send out branches in all sorts of other directions, so that no matter how it's cut,

this tree will fall to the east. As you sit here, try to stay with one object. Stay with one intention and plough through any hindrances that would come up against it. As you leave meditation, try to maintain that same sense of direction. It's all too easy to think that "Well, now that I'm out of concentration, I can entertain my thoughts—the ones I had to say 'no' to while I was formally sitting." But that's like sending a branch out in the opposite direction, to the west. Your tree is not nearly as certain as it would be if it were just leaning east.

We are leaning as we go through time, so you want to make sure you're leaning in the right direction. You do that by being very careful about your thoughts. The things that appear in the mind are the results of your past karma. But what you choose to focus on, what you choose to feed on, what you choose to encourage: That's your present karma. All too often, a thought comes into the mind and we treat it like a little package—a potential present. What's in here? We open it up and then we fall into the box.

You have to stay outside the box. In other words, look at the process by which the thought is formed. Look at the process by which a decision is made around the thought. That helps to prevent you from falling in. If it's something you genuinely want to go with—you see it's going in the right direction—okay, go with it. But even then you have to make sure it keeps steered in the right direction. When it's arrived where you meant it to go, get out.

To change the analogy, don't be the sort of person who goes online to see whatever comes up today. You want to go in with something in mind, something you want to find out. You get it and you get out. It's like going to a store. The wise way to go into a store is not to say, "Gee, what's on sale today?" You want to have a clear idea of what you want, you go get it, and you get out as fast as you can. That's how you should treat your thoughts—the skillful ones. As for the unskillful ones, you don't go into the store at all, because the thoughts that you go with are bending your mind.

So when something comes up, ask yourself, "Is this really in line with the path or am I wandering off into the jungle?" If it's in line with the path, okay, that's a good way to be bent. That's a good way to lean, so that if any events come up that would cut the tree down, you can be sure which direction it's going to fall. That's when you can really be secure.