Stay Principled

August 30, 2010

When we practice concentration or mindfulness, we tend spend a lot of time focusing on the technique: where to focus the mind, how to stay with the point of your focus or the theme of the meditation; how to work with it so that the mind can begin to settle down and stay settled down. There are even skills techniques how to leave meditation. All these are techniques that we can work on, but they're not what the meditation is all about. A lot of the meditation has to lie in developing your powers of observation and your own ingenuity.

You look at some of the steps the Buddha taught in breath meditation: being aware of the whole body as you breathe in, breathe out; learning how to calm the effects of the breath in the body; how to breathe with a sense of rapture, sense of pleasure. These are the tasks that the Buddha sets for you, but he doesn't tell you how to do them. For that, you need to use your own powers of observation, your own ingenuity—partly because the steps will be a little bit different for each person, and partly because one of the purposes of the meditation is to develop those powers of observation and ingenuity. Those are the powers that will lead to discernment.

They teach you how to pose useful questions and then figure out how to explore so that you can come to an answer. These are the skills you're going to turn and focus on the problems in your own mind. We talk about discernment as being the ability to see things in terms of the four noble truths, using the Buddha's teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self. Those are the general outlines, but each of us has his or her own specific problems, the things that cause us to suffer. Some people are over-confident. Some people lack confidence. Some people find it easy to get the mind to settle down but hard to gain insight; others find it the other way around.

So it's important that we learn how to use our own individual powers of observation and ingenuity to solve our own particular problems and to gain a greater understanding—a more specific understanding—about where we cause ourselves suffering, and how we can stop. That's the general outline.

As the Buddha points out, the problem is that ignorance, clinging, and craving cause suffering, but where are you going to find your ignorance? It's right there in your own mind,

but part of the nature of ignorance is that it's hard to see. So instead, the Buddha has you focus on the specific places where you're causing suffering and then work back from the suffering to the cause.

One of the huge areas in our lives is our relationships with other people: How do you cause suffering around that, and how can you use the teachings to apply to solve that problem?

First off, of course, it's important to understand what the teachings are. You hear so many different versions of what the Buddha taught, so it's good to go back to the sources and look what the Buddha described as his most basic teachings. He uses the word "categorical," *ekamsa,* to apply to teachings that are true across the board, and it turns out that there are only two sets of teachings that he labeled that way.

One set is the four noble truths that we chanted just now, first looking for the stress so that you can comprehend it. "Comprehending" here means watching it to see exactly where it's coming from. When you see where it's coming from, what activities in the mind are causing the stress, you learn to abandon those activities. Then you notice the times when stress ceases, or at the very least grows quiet, and you try to realize those moments. Sense them fully. All too often when we're dropping one craving, it's just so that we can pick up another one. We don't notice the times when the mind really is relatively free of stress, which would allow us to see when the craving comes, when it goes, when the ignorance comes, and when it goes. That should help us gain the insights that ultimately allow us to fully realize the cessation of stress and suffering, i.e., when there's no more stress or suffering in the mind.

And then there's the path that leads you there. Notice, the path doesn't *cause* the end of suffering—or doesn't cause nibbāna, let's put it that way. Nibbana is something that's totally uncaused, but the path leads you there. The basic elements in the path are virtue, concentration, and discernment. These are things you want to develop. You just don't sit back and watch them come and go, and learn to accept their coming and going. Actively try to figure out: How do you give rise to more virtue, more concentration, more discernment? Once it's arisen, how do you maintain it so that you can depend on it? These are tasks the Buddha sets for us and these are the basic tasks that underlie everything in the path, everything in the practice.

On another level, a bit closer to home, is the other set of categorical teachings: the instruction to develop what's skillful and to abandon what's unskillful. And here the Buddha's quite specific. What's skillful is largely a matter of virtue: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no

lying, no divisive speech, no harsh speech, no idle chatter. And then there are the inner virtues for the mind: no excessive greed, no ill-will, no wrong views.

So if anyone ever asks you what the Buddha's basic teachings are, these two sets of teachings—the four noble truths, and the basic teachings on how to deal with what's skillful and unskillful in thought, word, and deed—are the teachings that are true across the board.

Particularly with respect to wrong views: As the Buddha said, you've got to straighten out your views, understanding that action really does have results. The results can be immediate and they can be very long term.

On top of that, what you do is something you actually choose. You do have freedom of choice within certain limits. It's not the stars or some other outside forces acting through you. You're making the choices as to what to do, say, and think, and it really does make a difference. This is why the Buddha, at the end of his life, emphasized the teaching on heedfulness. He said you've really got to be careful about what you do, what you say, what you think, because it has consequences.

Now, if you weren't able to have any control over your actions, he wouldn't have taught heedfulness. Or if everything were wonderful, he wouldn't have taught heedfulness. But there are dangers out there, and you do have the ability to avoid those dangers.

It's because you can make choices that there is a virtue in generosity. It's because you have the ability to make choices that you owe gratitude to your parents—because they made choices, too. People who've looked after you chose to be helpful, and you always have to appreciate that, have gratitude for it. If you don't have gratitude for the good things that other people have done you, you can't really be trusted to be a good person yourself.

So these are some of the principles that underlie making your views straight.

Our views get crooked and go off-course from any one of four reasons: the four forms of bias. The first is bias in terms of liking or desiring. In other words, there are people we like, people we want to help, people we want to please, and in our desire to please them, we do things that really are not the right thing to do. You really have to be careful about that, because there's a huge amount of pressure in society, in a relationship, or your many relationships. The people you love, you want to please them, but, the Buddha says, you always have to keep the precepts in mind. Make sure that they're more important than pleasing the other person, because being pleasing in a moment is a poor trade for abandoning your precepts, abandoning your principles, which would cause long-term harm down the line. And the pleasant results

that may come from pleasing someone in the moment can easily turn into something else. When, say, the two of you or a group of people have worked together on a project that really is unskillful, then everybody has to live with the results of that unskillful action. And what happens then is that they usually turn on one another. This is another principle of wisdom or discernment: Always make sure that you go for the long-term happiness, not for the short-term. This means you have to avoid this kind of bias, the bias of wanting to please.

The second form of bias is the bias that comes from aversion for people you don't like, people you want to get back at. They've wronged you or someone you love, and you want to see them suffer. Here's a case where, actually, you don't really have to do anything. If you want to see them suffer, they will suffer someday, from their own karma. Maybe a little bit, maybe a lot, but you don't have to get involved. Because if you get involved, then it's going to be *your* karma. With people who really have done wrong, the principle of karma works out so that at some point down the line they're going to suffer. They may be suffering in the course of doing that wrong thing, but that doesn't mean that you have to get back at them. You have to protect your virtue, and that's a categorical teaching. Ill will and aversion have never solved anything.

The third form of bias is the bias that comes from delusion. And one of the major forms of delusion is when you're afraid that somebody else is going to harm you, so you figure out "How can I harm them first or stop them?" Of course, what that means is now the karma is yours. Often it's unskillful karma. It happens in lots of areas where we really don't understand the situation but we think we do.

This is a really hard form of bias to guard against, because delusion and ignorance are, by definition, hard to see. Which means you have to be very careful in observing: When you've acted in the past in situations like that, what were the results? There are so many cases where we act and get bad results, and yet we still stick with repeating that action. I think it was Einstein who said, "The definition of insanity is thinking you can do the same thing and yet get different results." We have a lot of bad habits, and a major source of delusion is thinking that the bad course of action is the only alternative. We can't even imagine ourselves acting in a different way.

One of the major cures for delusion is learning how to imagine yourself reacting in a different way. All too often, someone does something you find hurtful, and you have an automatic reaction. If you know that sort of thing tends to happen again and again and again, stop and think, "What can I say or do the next time around, so as not to react in an unskillful

way?" Imagine the other possibilities.

This is why it's good to have developed ingenuity as part of your meditation. You learn how think outside the box and realize that, regardless of the situation, there's always a skillful alternative, always a skillful choice, but sometimes it takes some thinking to get there. This is why one of the parts of right effort, as the Buddha described it, is to prevent unskillful qualities from arising. You know beforehand that a particular situation tends to draw out unskillful habits in you, so you prepare yourself: "The next time this happens, let's do something else." The next time this happens, post a warning sign in your mind that you've got to act, think, or speak in a different way. Plan things through.

Years back, when I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, one of my jobs was to clean his hut in the evening. If any issue had come up during the day, that was the time to talk to him: The hut was all cleaned, he'd had his bath, I'd washed his robes, he'd be having his cup of tea. If there was an issue that came up that I had to deal with, that was the time. Sometimes, though, I'd bring up an issue, and he'd come back at me with a retort that closed off the conversation. Sometimes those retorts were pretty stinging. I began to realize it wasn't just his mood for the day, it was that I'd actually said something wrong or approached the topic in a wrong way. So I figured, "Well, if it's an important topic, we've got to talk about it." The next day, on my way up to his hut, I would try to figure out, "What's another way to approach the topic?" If I got it right, there would be no problem in having the conversation.

So an important part of the practice is planning: knowing that situations are going to come up and actually planning what you're going to do. You don't want to just leave it to the spur of the moment, because usually at the spur of the moment the alternatives suddenly disappear and all you've got are your old habits. So if you know there's a situation that causes trouble, sit down and think about it: What would be a better response?

This helps get through not only the bias caused by delusion, but also the last of the list, which is bias caused by fear. You're afraid of your boss, you're afraid of your spouse, you're afraid of what would happen if you did something they don't like. As soon as a difficult situation arises, the fear kicks in and that closes down all the alternatives. On the one hand, you have to remind yourself that the biggest thing to fear in life is that you're going to abandon your precepts, that you're going to abandon your virtue, that you're going to stray off the path.

The treasure of having the path or the qualities of mind you develop along the path is more important than any external treasure. So when a situation comes up that you think might cause

you to feel tempted to abandon the path, you've got to think it through: "Okay, what exactly am I afraid of here? Which is the greater fear? Which is the greater danger?" In some cases you'll be able to figure out that there are more skillful alternatives that don't cause danger on either side. And if it turns out that there's no clear diplomatic skillful way to take care of both sides, then you say, "Okay, the greater danger is abandoning my principles, abandoning the path." Be willing to put up with some difficulties because this is where the path really shows its value. When things get difficult, you've still got something really solid and valuable inside, and that's something you never want to abandon.

So these are some of the principles to keep in mind as to what right view is and where we tend to stray away from right view and right practice. A lot of the practice is, on the one hand, keeping these principles in mind and then, on the other hand, being observant and using your ingenuity in how to stick with these principles in all the difficult, complex, and uncertain areas of your life. If you can be clear on these things and you can take the difficulties not so much as obstacles but as challenges, then you come out ahead.

For instance, the precepts put up certain barriers, but they're not commandments coming from the Buddha. There's just his observation that if you break these precepts, you're going to suffer. You're going to cause harm. So you want to keep the precepts in mind and use your ingenuity in applying them so that the practice of the precepts in and of itself develops mindfulness and your discernment.

After all, discernment isn't just a matter of cloning the wisdom your read about in books. Discernment is figuring out how to do the skillful thing given the situation. It's strategic. It's a skill—which is why we work not only on mastering the techniques in meditation but also on using our ingenuity and powers of observation to make *them* skillful, because then we can use those powers to develop skill in other areas of our lives as well.