Ready to Go, Ready to Stay

September 30, 2020

There’s a story in the Commentary that John Sowett related at one time about a young girl who was the daughter of a weaver. One day the Buddha comes to the house on his alms round, and the young girl goes out, and as she’s putting food in his bowl, he asks her, “Do you know?” And she says, “Yes.” “Do you know?” “No.” “But do you know?” “Yes.” And the Buddha turns around and goes away. The parents are upset. “How can you speak like that to the Buddha, back and forth like that?” And she said, “Well, I understood what he meant. The first question, ‘Do you know? Do you know you’re going to die?’ The answer is ‘Yes.’ The second one is, ‘Do you know when?’ ‘No.’ ‘But do you know you’re going to die?’ ‘Yes.’” That’s the predicament we’re in. We know some bad things lie ahead of us. We have to prepare. And we don’t know how long we have. In the case of the young girl, the story goes on that that day her father was working at the loom, and the shuttle got out of his control and struck her and killed her. Fortunately, she was a meditator and she was ready to go. But if the shuttle hadn’t struck her, she would have been ready to stay. And that’s the skill we have to develop as meditators, to be ready to go and ready to stay. It would be easier if we knew that we had only so much time. We could prepare. We wouldn’t have to worry about preparing for this life beyond that. But we don’t have that option. So we have to be prepared to survive and we have to be prepared to go, which means that we have to take care of the important business of now. I read once of an army general who would make a list every day. Of the ten most important things that had to be done, he ranked one to ten. And then, after having made the list, he would cross out everything except one and two. You have to focus on those to make sure they were done right. So for us as meditators, one and two are the mind and its intelligence. Our intentions can go running off in many directions. We have lots of possibilities. As the Buddha said, the mind is capable of more variety than the animal kingdom. Every animal out there, all the different types of animals, come from an intention of a particular kind. G. H. Whiten is a great philosopher. He illustrates this by saying that God had created all the animals as embryos and then offered them a choice. You’re going to go into the world and you’re going to need some weapons. You’re going to need some protection. So the animals all line up and they choose their weapons. Big teeth, big claws, tough skin, whatever, except for the human being. The human being says, “I think I’ll make my choice.” And that’s the riddle. But you think about the variety of the animal kingdom. It does come from intentions. Somebody wanted to be born as a toad. Someone wanted to be born as a dog. They created a mind state that was headed in that direction. So those are some of the directions the mind can go. You have to ask yourself, “What kind of direction do I want it to go?” And you’re very careful about your intentions while you meditate and while you’re not formally meditating. In this way, you learn how to get some control over the mind, how to get it in the directions you want it to go. So right now our intentions are to stay with the breath, to work with the breath to make it comfortable, to expand that sense of comfort, and then to maintain it. It’s a simple enough set of intentions. The problem is that the mind has probably some other intentions as well, and they get in the way. Then there are also obstacles coming in from your past intentions. So you have to accept the past karmic obstacles as a good support, saying, “I must have done something in the past that brings these obstacles on.” And then you do your best to work around them. From the point of view of the Four Noble Truths, there’s no obstacle that can’t be worked around, in terms of not making it go away, but learning how to not suffer from it. So if there are any pains in the body right now, or any discomfort, or there’s a persistent thought that keeps coming, you ask yourself, “How can I make myself skillful enough so I don’t have to suffer from this?” In the beginning, it usually means not paying attention to that thing, whatever it is, and gathering your forces. In other words, going to another part of the body, going to another part of the mind, and developing a sense of well-being there. In other words, you’re going at this strategic level, strategically. When the Buddha talks about sanghvega, it literally means “terror.” Sometimes it’s translated as “urgency.” It gives the impression that we’re going to do a rush job. But you can’t do a rush job on the mind. It can be very particular about how it’s going to settle down, where it’s going to settle down, what object, what thought will be congenial. So you have to keep testing, testing, testing. And if you realize there are certain areas where you simply are not ready to take on a problem, you learn how to avoid it. So you build up your strength. So even though the Buddha says we should practice as if our head was on fire, remember, people whose heads are on fire, if they just run around, they’re likely to get even more burned. You have to be very methodical about where you’re going to find the water, how you’re going to put it out, determined to put it out. But if there are any series of steps that you have to follow to get there, you’re willing to follow the steps. So this is our predicament, not knowing how much time we have left and having a detailed job we’ve got to do to try to develop that underlying intention that, whether it’s in this lifetime or a future lifetime, I’m going to keep at this. So the fact of death doesn’t discourage you. It’s okay. If it comes, it comes, but it is possible to continue practicing. Then you do the job that has to be done. It’s in this way that contemplation of death is useful. You contemplate it enough to stir yourself to act, but not so much that you get discouraged or paralyzed. As with all the accessory meditation topics, what John Lee says are places to go foraging, you have to have a sense of how much is enough. Same with contemplation of the body. It can be a good antidote to lust, a good antidote to pride. If you do it too much, you’re doing it the wrong way. You can start getting disgusted with the body, start getting disgusted with food, disgusted with everything. That’s not right. As the Buddha said, if you find that happening, go back to the breath. The breath is like a big cloud that comes at the end of the hot season, washes all that dust and heat out of the air. So keep the breath as home base, and learn how to use the foraging topics as they’re useful, as they’re helpful. But be keeping in mind that we do have this one big issue. We’ve got a mind that, if we’re not careful, can get out of control. So you have to learn how to bring some intelligent control to it. That way, as you face the uncertainties, as time unfolds, your mind won’t be part of the problem. It’ll be your ally. It’ll be your friend. It’ll be helping you to be prepared if you have to go or if you have to stay. So either way, you’ll be able to handle whatever comes up.

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