

Two Roads to the Grand Canyon

February 17, 2013

I just came back from a trip to the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. When I was on the road there and the road back, I was thinking about an image I've used many times in the past: that the path of practice we're following here is like the road to the Grand Canyon. It doesn't cause the Grand Canyon to be, and the fact that you're following the path doesn't cause the Grand Canyon to be, but following the road takes you there.

But this time going to the Canyon, we entered by one road and came back by another. There are basically two roads to the South Rim, and they illustrate the dangers on the path in two different ways. The road coming from the south bears no resemblance to the Grand Canyon at all. The land is flat and scrubby. Nothing special at all. This is similar to the fact that the path is quite different from the goal, which is why many people object to certain parts of the path. After all, we're going to a goal that's totally unconditioned, so how can the path be conditioned? We're going to a goal that doesn't require any effort or choices when you're there, so why should the path require effort? Why should it require choices? Yet that's simply the way it is.

After all, why should the road to the Grand Canyon look like the Grand Canyon? The Grand Canyon itself is not a road. But to get there, you have to make an effort. When you're standing at the Grand Canyon, there's no effort required at all. But to get there, you do have to work. It's not just a matter of letting go or accepting things as they are. You really do have to put together the causes that can bring the path together.

Virtue, concentration, and discernment all require work. If virtue were easy or natural, it wouldn't require training. The Buddha wouldn't have called it a training. The same with concentration: You do have to put an effort into it. It's a very delicate effort in the sense that it requires a lot of precision, but it also requires strong dedication. The same with discernment: You have to think things through from many different angles, look at them from many different angles, and be as carefully observant as you can.

This is one of the reasons why the training traditionally has been an apprenticeship. You try to find a qualified teacher and stay with that person for at least five years, maybe more, because as the Buddha points out, some people are like the tongue that can taste the soup and immediately know the taste of the soup. Other people are more like the spoon that sits in the soup and never knows the taste. And staying with the teacher is not just a matter of learning about the words of the Dhamma or of the Vinaya, or learning about the techniques of meditation. It's a total training because if you're going to be observant in your meditation, you have to learn how to be observant outside.

It may seem like little things are unimportant: where things are placed, how we can save money on our heating bills, or whatever. They seem to be far away from nibbana, but going to nibbana requires that you be observant. As Ajaan Lee once said, "When you live in a monastery, your eyes have to be as large as the monastery." In other words, you have to see what's going on. Not that you make it a burden on yourself, but you have to be observant and do what you can. This may seem like a petty issue, but it's not. If you can't observe things outside, you're certainly not going to observe the little tricks the mind plays on itself inside. And those are often the things that really stand in the way of insight.

So you have to accept the fact that there are certain features of the path that are not like the goal at all. As Ven. Ananda pointed out, we're here to get to the point where we don't need food any more, and yet following the path requires food. We try to go beyond craving and conceit, and yet following the path requires a certain amount of craving and a certain amount of conceit. You need to have the desire, and to have the confidence that you can do this path if your practice is going to succeed.

That's one type of danger. The other type of danger is illustrated by the road coming to the South Rim from the east. You go along near the canyon of the Little Colorado River, and if all you know about canyons is what you've read, you might think you've already reached the Grand Canyon. After all, it is a canyon, and it's relatively big. Only when you actually get

to the Grand Canyon do you realize that the canyon of the Little Colorado River is very small in comparison, and it's nothing at all like the Grand Canyon. This illustrates the danger that some parts of the path mimic what you may have heard about the goal. This is why there are people out there who think they've gained awakening, or they think they've gained stream entry or whatever, when they haven't gotten anywhere near. I seem to be encountering more and more of these people all the time. Some of them have been certified by other teachers. But the question is: Are the teachers qualified? Have they seen the Grand Canyon?

One of the worst things you can do to yourself in the practice is to assume that you've reached a noble attainment when you actually haven't, because that cuts off the possibility of genuine discernment arising. So you always have to be cautious. Feelings of oneness, feelings of light, and feelings of spaciousness: These things all come under the factors of concentration. A sudden opening up can be what's technically called a neurotic breakthrough. It's not a good term; it sounds like you're becoming neurotic, but actually, it's a breakthrough through a neurosis that you've been carrying around. You suddenly realize you don't have to carry it around any more. There's a very strong sense of coming into the present moment, being freed of a lot of the narratives you carried around. But that, too, is just the canyon of the Little Colorado River.

I've talked to people who say fairly nonchalantly that, oh yes, they've experienced the deathless, and it's no big deal. Actually, the deathless is a Very Big Deal. But if you think that what you had was an experience of the deathless, that cuts off the possibility of any further progress.

So you have to be careful about not overestimating your attainments. When something happens in the meditation, just put a little post-it note on it and realize it's just a post-it note. If you have no idea what it is, okay, put a question mark on it. Then watch it for a while and see what it does. Or if the idea that you've reached a certain attainment comes into the mind, notice how the mind reacts to that idea. If you can see any defilement in your reaction, you've come out ahead; you've learned an important lesson about the mind.

So when you think about the path to the goal, think about those two roads to the Grand Canyon. They illustrate different dangers on the path and important principles to keep in mind as you practice. This is a conditioned path. You do have to be fired by a certain desire and a certain passion because, after all, the path is fabricated. As the Buddha said, it's the highest of all fabricated phenomena, but it is a fabrication. All fabrications require desire, and they all involve effort. The discernment comes in figuring out how much effort is just right. This is one of the big lessons you learn as you practice concentration. How much pressure do you have to put on the concentration to maintain it, to keep your focus steady, to keep mindfulness continuous? And how much effort is actually getting in the way?

In many ways, practicing concentration is like relaxing into a yoga pose. When you first get into the pose, you feel a little stiff because of the patterns of tension going through the body. But as you stick with the pose, you begin to realize that you can relax this muscle, you can relax that muscle, and you actually get more comfortably into the pose.

So as you sit here and meditate, you're relaxing into the pose of a still mind. As you see different layers of activity falling away—or the potential that they could fall away—and yet you can still maintain the concentration: That's one of the ways you'll gain discernment through the practice of concentration. These are some of the issues of the road coming in from the south.

As for the road coming in from the east, always keep in mind: It doesn't really matter what name you put on things. The question always is, "Does that experience really put an end to suffering?" You have to look again and again and again to see what levels of suffering remain because we're not here for status. We're here to cure these really bad habits we have of creating stress and suffering for ourselves when we don't really have to.