

The Basic Pattern

June 27, 2006

The passage in the Canon where the Buddha is teaching his seven year old son is one that bears frequent reading, frequent reflection, because it contains a lot of the really basic principles of the practice. Basic not in the sense of *Buddhism for Dummies*; basic in the sense of containing the essential pattern of all the teachings. You can look at these instructions as the Buddha's introduction to meditation practice, because meditation doesn't start on this cushion, it starts in your daily life. The Pali word for meditation, *bhavana*, means "to develop" —to develop good qualities in the mind.

And it's important to look at the qualities that the Buddha's recommending that his son develop. The discourse starts with a passage on truthfulness. You get the feeling that his son, Rahula, probably lied during the day. When the Buddha comes to see him that evening, Rahula sees him in the distance and sets out some water for washing the feet. As the Buddha washes his feet with the water, he leaves a little bit of water in the dipper. He shows the little bit of water to Rahula and says, "See how little water there is in this dipper?" Rahula says, "Yes, sir." The Buddha says, "That's how little goodness there is in a person who feels no shame at telling a deliberate lie." You can imagine Rahula cringing.

Then the Buddha throws the water away and says, "See how that water is thrown away?" Rahula says, "Yes." "That's what happens to the goodness of a person who feels no shame at telling a deliberate lie. It gets thrown away like that." The Buddha then turns the dipper upside down and then shows him how empty and hollow it is, each time with the same message: that when you feel no shame at telling a deliberate lie your goodness gets turned upside down and is empty and hollow.

So what the Buddha's establishing here is the principle of truthfulness: that you're honest about what you do. And this means being honest not only with other people, but also with yourself. Honest about what? The rest of the discourse goes on to point out that you're honest about your actions—before you act, while you're acting, and after you've acted. Take a good, close look at what you're planning to do, what you're doing, and what you've done. Before you do it, look at your intention. This act you're planning to do, what result do you expect from it? Are the results you expect going to cause any harm? If they are, don't do it. So there's an important principle right there: that your intentions are

important. The consequences of your actions are important. And you want to act in a way that doesn't harm anybody. This is the beginning of compassion.

While you're acting—and this covers not only physical actions, but also the things you say and even the things you think—look at the results that are happening while you're still engaged in the action. Sometimes things happen that you didn't expect. If there's any unexpected harm, stop. If you don't see any unexpected harm, you can continue with the action.

When you're done, reflect on the results your actions have had over time. If you see any unexpected harm, then if it was a verbal or physical action, go and confess it to somebody else who's had experience on the path. Get advice from that person. If it was simply a mental action, the Buddha says to develop a sense of distaste for that action: You don't want to think in those ways ever again.

This establishes the principle that you shouldn't be ashamed or try to hide the results of your actions from other people. You should be open about your mistakes. If you can be open about your mistakes with other people, it's a lot easier to start being open about them with yourself. At the same time, you learn from the wisdom of other people. The Buddha doesn't recommend that you reinvent the Dharma wheel every time you act.

If, however, you notice that there was no harm from your actions, the Buddha says, "Take joy in your practice and continue with the training."

There are a lot of important principles here: the principle of truthfulness and integrity, the principle of compassion. These things are essential to the practice. Even the Buddha's most refined teachings, on the topic of emptiness, follow this same pattern: get your mind in a state of concentration and then look at it. Don't make assumptions about what it is, but just look at the intention maintaining that state of concentration. See where there's any disturbance in it; appreciate where there's a lack of disturbance. "Lack of disturbance" here corresponds to a lack of harm. The disturbance can be equated with harm on a very subtle level.

But the important thing is that you look at your meditation in terms of action and result. All too often, when people reach, say, a sense of infinite consciousness, they slip off and identify with the infinite consciousness as their "true being" or the "ground of being" from which all things come, and to which they all return. They make all sorts of assumptions based on that perception. Or they can go into the state of non-perception, where there's nothing there at all, and make assumptions based on that, forgetting to look at the fact that the state of concentration was something they did, and now they're experiencing the results. Like any other action, the concentration has to be viewed *as* an action and judged by its results.

So whatever level of practice you're on, whether it's simply day-to-day interactions with other people or working directly with your mind, this is the

pattern the Buddha has you adopt all the time: Look at your intentions, look at your actions, look at their results, and then adjust things based on what harm you see your actions have done. If you see that the results aren't as good as you'd like, go back and look at the intention, change the action. This requires two principles: integrity and compassion.

These are the basic Buddhist values. These are the basic values of the practice. And they can be applied at any level: among students in a classroom, or just interacting with other people in general, or as you're sitting here meditating. Remember, you're *doing* something. The principle of karma, which is the Buddha's basic teaching, underlies everything, reminding you that your actions are important, that they do have consequences, and that you have the freedom to change the way you act. If you see that the consequences are causing harm, causing suffering, you can change the way you act. You have that freedom. You can learn from your mistakes.

After all, the Buddha himself started out making a lot of mistakes in his practice: all those years of self affliction, extreme austerities, six years of a big mistake. And imagine the pride that went along with that. He was able to do without all kinds of pleasures, all kinds of comforts. He practically starved himself to death. He held his breath until he went unconscious. He ate so little food that just with the effort of urinating or defecating, he would fall over. He was so weak and thin.

And in a case like that, what keeps you going? Usually, a strong sense of pride: You can do without things other people can't do without. But finally the Buddha was able to overcome his pride and realize that there was something wrong with what he was doing. This couldn't be the right way. There had to be another way. And he totally changed his understanding of the practice, totally changed the way he practiced. As a result, he was able to find the way out of suffering.

So as we practice in our imperfect ways, it's good to remind ourselves that the Buddha himself started out imperfect as well. As we make mistakes, it's good to remind ourselves that the Buddha made mistakes, too, but he also pointed the way out of your mistakes. You can change the way you act, and it's important that you do because your actions shape your life. The pleasure and pain you experience in life comes from your actions, not from anything you innately *are*. So when you notice that there are problems in your life, look here at what you're doing. What are your intentions? What are your actions? What can you change?

This requires that you be very honest with yourself, that you have the integrity to admit your mistakes, to see the connection between your intentions and the results of your actions, and the compassion, both for yourself and the people around you, not to want to cause harm. Once you've developed this

integrity in your day-to-day life, then it's a lot easier to bring the integrity into your meditation, because integrity lies at the basis of meditating well, too. This is why the precepts are so important. They develop this quality of integrity. If you can't be honest with yourself on the blatant level, then it's very hard to be honest with yourself on the subtle level of the practice.

So it's good to keep reflecting on those instructions to Rahula, because they focus on the basic principle that underlies everything in the practice: Your actions are important, so be very careful. At the end of the Buddha's teaching career, he closed with the words, "Bring your practice to completion through heedfulness." What does it mean to be heedful? It means that you have to be very careful about what you do, because what you do does make a difference, and it does make a difference to be heedful. If everything were totally predetermined by some principle of fate or iron-clad causality, nothing would make any difference at all, and the Buddha wouldn't have had any reason to teach. Or if your actions didn't really make a difference, there would be no reason to be heedful. But they *do* make a difference. And the care you take in looking at your intentions and looking at the results of your actions: That's what determines whether you'll be able to complete the path or not.

So when you're looking for a Buddhist principle to apply in all areas, this is it: Be careful about what you do, be heedful about what you do, because it makes an important difference in your life.