Nobility

January, 2003

We use the word “noble” to describe the path that we’re following, the truths that we’re trying to understand, and the kind of people we want to become to be. We’re translating a Pali word, “arya.” “Noble” has a lot of meanings. On the one hand, it means “civilized.” Another meaning is “standard,” “standard” in the sense of having a high standard or setting a high standard. There’s a passage where the Buddha contrasts two different kinds of truths. There are noble truths and then there are personal truths, personal in the sense of things that are true for individual people, things that are subjective. Noble means something that’s more objective, a sense of being an absolute. It’s true across the board for everybody. There is suffering for everybody. There is a cause for suffering. There is a cessation of that suffering, and there’s a path to the end of that suffering. These truths hold across the board, no matter who you are. In a sense, the word “arya” is pretty well translated by “noble,” in the sense of being civilized. There’s also that meaning of “noble” that we tend to forget, which means “unchanging.” We talk about noble metals, noble elements, the noble gases. These are the ones that don’t mix with anything else. They always stay the same way they are. Like gold. Gold is a noble metal. That’s the reason it’s so valuable. No matter how long you keep it, it doesn’t rust. It doesn’t turn into anything else. I was just reading in an astronomy book an old passage from a Greek author, talking about the noblest things you’ll see in your life are the sun and the stars, because they never change. They’re always the same. Whether you’re young or old, the sun has never changed. The stars have never changed. Of course, since then we’ve learned that they do change. But there’s still that idea that nobility means unchanging, that you’re not affected by things, that your mind isn’t turned aside by things. This is what we talk about when we talk about a noble person. The word has been tarnished by the idea of the nobility, who many times were not very noble. So it’s important that we dust off the word a little bit and remind ourselves of what it originally meant. We’re following a path that holds for everybody. The truths we’re trying to understand are truths that hold for everyone. This is why we can bring a teaching from India 2,500 years ago and still practice it now. When the Buddha says, “There’s suffering in life,” you look at your life and you say, “Yep, there’s suffering.” He points out the various things that are suffering, ultimately. Clinging to form, feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness. He says that clinging is suffering. We look in our minds and we find that it’s true. We look in our minds and we also find craving. An important part of the practice is learning to see the connection between the two. Wherever there’s craving, there’s going to be clinging. Wherever there’s clinging, there’s suffering. Fortunately, however, we also have good things in our mind. We’ve got virtue, we’ve got concentration, we’ve got discernment to some extent or another. If we didn’t have these things, how could we develop them? They’re already there. They’re not as yet unchanging in our minds. But the way they function doesn’t change. In other words, the more virtue we have, the more concentration, the more discernment, the more we’ll find suffering falling away. That relationship is unchanging. So this is why the path to nirvana, even though it’s something constructed, is a noble truth. The third noble truth is cessation. There are different interpretations as to whether that equals nirvana or it’s simply the act of suffering ceasing. The second interpretation seems to be probably the better one. That’s something that happens, that opens up to nirvana, which is the ultimate noble truth. It doesn’t change at all. The people who find that, though, become noble people because they’ve seen that truth, what the Buddha has to say about the difference between fabricated reality and unfabricated reality. It’s really true. Once you’ve finally seen that, you develop the eye of Dharma. You really see things as they are. Even though you may not get rid of all your defilements on that first arising of the eye of Dharma, still there is that element in your mind that doesn’t change. It’s not touched by anything. It will never be affected by anything. Just like gold isn’t touched by the things around it. You can bury it in dust and dirt, and the dust and dirt don’t change the gold into anything else. This is why people like this have a solidity to them. This is the kind of solidity that we want to discover in ourselves. To see it, we have to make our minds as solid as possible. Of course, making solid is something different from discovering the solidity that’s there, but it’s only by making the mind solid and secure. As best you can make it through a path that’s constructed that puts you in a position where you can open up and see what really is unconstructed inside. From this point of view, you look at other things in life and you realize that they’re not nearly as important as this practice of the path. This has to have first priority in our lives, because the other things we might latch onto are sure to change. They always mix up with other things. As soon as things get mixed together, they change. There’s no telling where they’ll go. So the question as we try to put the path into practice is, what gets priority in our lives? Are we going to give priority to noble things or to more personal things? Part of us says, “Well, I’d like my personal reality.” Do we want to give priority to that? Do we want to give it up? But look at where your personal reality takes you. It’s because you identify with it that it causes your problems, because it keeps changing on you. It keeps mixing up with other things. In Thai, they have the word “glai.” You mix A with B. Instead of just getting A plus B, you get C, something different entirely. And then C gets mixed with D, and there’s no A and B left there anymore. In other words, what starts out as pleasure might end up as pain, the exact opposite. It’s like that story they tell of the drum whose head needed patching, and then it needed another patch, and then it needed another patch, until ultimately the drum head was the original drum head was totally gone. It was just patches, totally different things. Or look at your body right now. They say that it takes seven years for all the cells in the body to change. The molecules that were in your body when you first were born are not there anymore. This is something else. So this is the nature of things that change. They just keep changing and changing, and not just changing slightly, but even though the changes may seem incremental, they can turn into the total opposite. Sometimes the changes aren’t incremental. One night of wind, and look what we’ve got. Totally different monastery now. Some things are the same, but the feel of the place is very different. The important thing is that our minds don’t change. This is what we’re working on as we practice. Developing concentration, the Buddha said, is the heart of the path. People tend to forget this. They shift attention over to mindfulness as being the most important part. But when the Buddha ranks the importance of the different paths, he says, “Right concentration is the heart of the path. The other seven factors are its requisites, things that it depends on in order to keep it right.” But this is the heart, trying to make the mind as still and as still as possible. Solid and as dependable as we can. After all, the insight that comes, that we’re trying to develop, can be pretty threatening if your mind is not stable. We talk about the strengths in the practice. Conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. One way of understanding this is that the first four get your mind strengthened to the point where it can take the insights that the Buddha has to offer. Those things we identify with, those things we latch onto as mind. We have to put the mind in a position where it doesn’t feel threatened by being told that they’re not really yours, until it actually sees the advantages of letting them go. And to do that, it requires strength. Part of that strength is understanding the principle of karma. Realizing that you are creating your experience all the time. It’s a combination of past karma and present karma. The creative force lies in here. Your sense of who you are, what you want to identify with, your personal truths, those are not a given. Those are things that you create. If you really look at your actions, you realize that sometimes you’re skillful, sometimes you’re not. That requires you to step back and look at your actions more objectively. The Buddha said that he first got on the path when he was able to step back and look at his thoughts. Instead of simply identifying, “Well, this is my thought, therefore I’m going to get into thinking it,” he realized he had the choice. He could follow it up or not. If it looked like it was being motivated by unskillful motivations, well, he could drop it and stop it. Once you develop that sort of objectivity to your actions and your thoughts, then it’s a lot easier to look at other more endearing things or other things you tend to be more attached to. Then you begin to question those, too. “Are these things I really want to hold on to?” If you’re persistent in following through with this principle, realizing how responsible you are for your actions and your choices, and that they really are important in your life, then you get more and more dedicated to this principle of skillfulness. That persistence, the skillful qualities that are needed in order to act properly, which are mindfulness and alertness, can bring you to a stronger state of concentration. The mind has a sense of well-being, a sense of solidity, and it doesn’t feel so threatened by the ideas of letting go of things. After all, to get the mind concentrated, a lot of things you have to let go. You put aside your concerns about daily life. You put aside your worries about what other people think about you. You put aside all kinds of things that might bother you ordinarily. You just allow the mind to settle down and be still. You realize that by letting go of those things, there’s a great sense of well-being that comes into the mind. That’s the kind of mind that’s ready to hear what the Buddha has to say about discernment. As you look more and more carefully at the things you do with your mind, you realize that some things lead to only temporary happiness, and other things lead to more lasting happiness. When the Buddha talks about impermanence, he’s not talking to people just sitting around and deciding what they want to enjoy for the day. They have to ask themselves, “What do I want to produce with the time and energy I have?” After all, your time is limited. Your energy is limited. What’s the best investment for your time and energy? You spend all your time building houses out of cards. You don’t have much to show for it. If you spend your time digging up the gold that lies inside you, then you’ve got a lot to show for it. So it only makes sense that you want to look at something that’s more lasting, look for something more lasting in your actions. Especially when you realize that if you spend a lot of time working on impermanent or inconstant things, they’re going to make you suffer, and they’re not really yours anyhow. They stay a little while, then they go. Then you’re more willing to look at what you might do otherwise with your time, other things that you can look for. When you have this perspective, it’s a lot easier for you to let go of all the unskillful things, all the things that tie the mind down, to let go of that clinging that’s causing the suffering. Once you let go, not because you’re forced to, but because it seems like the only thing you would want to do at that point. When you see that you’re clinging and it’s causing suffering and you don’t have to cling, you let go. It’s a sense of great freedom, a sense of the mind finally settling down in the most solid place it could possibly be, or discovering the most solid thing it could possibly find, something really noble. So look at your life. What do you want to do with it? Do you want to have something noble to show for it, or do you want to have something more personal? Because when you get to the real and noble level, a sense of personality falls to the side, a sense of personal identity falls to the side. And if you’re ready for it, it’s not threatening at all. But it has to come from that strength that we build inside. There are a lot of neurotic people out there who want to let go of themselves because they hate who they are. And that’s not what the Buddha is talking about at all. That, in fact, can get very unhealthy. You have to develop strengths inside. You have to develop these solid qualities within you that are essentially a healthy person. Then you let go out of health. And what’s left is noble. It doesn’t change. It doesn’t interact with anything at all. When that has priority in your life, then you find that you’ve had a life well lived. No matter how much effort has had to go into the practice, it doesn’t weigh on you at all, because it’s been more than repaid. And all the various skills that you develop to get there, even though you have to let them go, in other words, you would let go of the path at the last step. But you find that as long as you live after that, the qualities of the path are still there for you to use as you need them. So in letting go, you’re not depriving yourself of anything. It’s simply that you learn how to carry your tools around without them weighing you down. When the point finally comes that you don’t need tools anymore, then you’re done with them. You don’t need tools for anything at all. In the moment of Awakening, you’ve finished your own personal work. If you have time left to help other people, fine. But then ultimately there’s a point where there’s no more jobs, no more needs—yours or anyone else’s. That’s when things get so noble there’s no word to describe them.

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