In-line Practice

August, 2003

Jon Swat mentioned many times that one of Ajahn Mun’s favorite topics for a Dhamma talk was practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. In other words, instead of trying to change the Dhamma to fit our preconceived notions, we should try to change ourselves, bring ourselves in line with the Dhamma. When you look at the teachings, the Dhamma makes lots of demands. I remember when I translated the Dhammapada, I showed it to someone, and his immediate reaction was, “Why are there so many shoulds in this? Why are there so many imperatives? Do this, do that.” Of course, the following weekend, they’re giving a course on the Metta Sutta. They’re going to go through it line by line, comparing different translations, and then working with the Pali to see what translation the group could come up with. They hit that first line, “This is what should be done by one seeking a state of peace.” Somebody in the group raised his hand and said, “Why is there a should there? Why? I thought Buddhism didn’t have shoulds.” The should is there in the sense that if you want that state of peace, there’s a very definite path to follow. It’s up to you to choose whether you want to follow that path or not, but if that’s the goal you have, there are very definite things that are required of you. Holding by the precepts, practicing concentration, working on discernment to pry away your attachments. It’s a heavy job. In terms of the precepts, you have to restrain yourself from doing things that you might rather do. In terms of concentration, you’ve got to focus the mind on one topic. You can’t let it wander around as it likes. In terms of discernment, you’ve got to deal with your defilements as they come up. When lust comes up, you’ve got to focus on the body. Go through the thirty-two parts. Think about things that a large part of your mind would rather not think about. Same with anger. Same with greed. When these things come up, there’s an urge to go along with the flow, and the Dhamma goes against that flow. So we have to decide whether we’re going to choose a teaching that lets us go with the flow but can’t guarantee that it goes any place, as opposed to a teaching where the Buddha challenges you, “Can you prove him wrong? If you follow this path, really follow this path sincerely. Practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. Can you prove that it won’t take you to the Deathless?” He challenges people. And it’s up to each of us to decide whether or not we want to follow that challenge. We simply want to follow the path that suits our inclinations, do what we want to do, and avoid doing what we don’t want to do. That’s not really a path. That’s just the way people are in the world. You look at the example set by the great Thayajans. They went through a lot of hardships, and yet they came out from the other end of the ring saying it was more than worth it. The Buddha himself once said, “If you could make a deal that for a hundred years, every day for a hundred years, you’d allow yourself to be speared by a hundred spears in the morning, and then again at noon, and then again in the evening, day after day after day, but with the guarantee that at the end of the hundred years you would gain awakening.” He said it would be a deal that would be worth making. And he said that when the awakening came, you wouldn’t feel that it had been one with pain or suffering. It’s that special, an awakening. So when we run into hardships in the practice, when things don’t seem to be going as we’d like them to, or the mind seems recalcitrant, remember that whatever the difficulties are, if the reward that comes with working through them, dealing with them, going against the flow, is more than worth the effort. Each time you start going with the flow, realize that you’re making a choice. One good way of checking yourself is to simply ask yourself that question, “Is this the choice you really want to make?” Because every time we make a choice, we’re setting out on a particular path. And for most of us, our choices are pretty random, which is why our lives are so random. You choose to follow the Buddha a little bit, then you decide to follow your greed for a while, and then you follow your anger for a while. This is why it’s called the wandering on, wandering without a compass, without a sense of direction, without really arriving anyplace at all. That’s the nature of samsara. Oftentimes we don’t tend to think of samsara as a place, but actually it’s a process. It’s something the mind does. It wanders around pretty aimlessly. The whole point of the path is to take the choices that the mind makes and to direct them in one direction. There is a purpose to meditation. If there weren’t a purpose, then it would be just ordinary, everyday samsara. And there is something better than ordinary everyday samsara. Samsara-ing, you might call it. That’s what we’re testing here in the practice. Is the Buddha speaking rightly when he says there is a deathless, and it can be found through our own efforts? The only way you can test that is to put forth your own effort. To see for yourself that if aligning your various choices in one direction like this, towards freedom from suffering, towards putting out the fires of passion, aversion, and delusion, does it really make a difference? Does it really take you someplace special? Does it open up to another? Does it open up to another dimension? This is what we’re testing as we practice here. We’re taking the Buddha’s instructions seriously, trying to follow the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. When our preferences get in the way, we put them to one side. One of the best ways of doing that is to ask, “Is that really your preference? Do you really want to follow greed when it comes up? Do you really want to follow lust when it comes up? Do you really want to follow anger, aversion, irritation, delusion when they come up?” These have been habits for a long time in the mind, but have you had enough of those habits? Or do you still want more? If you step back and think about it, you begin to realize you’ve gone where greed can take you. You’ve gone where anger can take you. The Buddha once said, “If you see someone who’s wealthy with all kinds of sensual pleasures, every imaginable sensual pleasure, people waiting on him hand and foot, remind yourself you’ve been there.” If you see someone who’s had a leper lying at the side of the road, having to cauterize his wounds because they itch and they hurt so much, remind yourself you’ve been there as well. Just this thought in and of itself should be enough to make you aim towards release. Many people say they’ve come to the practice through having experimented with drugs. Drugs do show you in a way that there are other levels of consciousness that are a lot more pleasant than our ordinary, everyday level of consciousness. That’s all they do. They give you a glimpse of something better, what seems better at the time, but then it goes away. A lot of people turn to the Dhamma looking for a way to practice that would basically give them a permanent high, which is not what the Dhamma has to offer. But those glimpses, those experiences with the drugs, show you that you’re already satisfied. Ordinary, everyday experience is pretty unsatisfactory. A lot of growing up in the world is learning how to downsize your expectations, downsize your hopes for happiness. And the drug experience reminded them how much they had downsized. That’s basically what it’s done. So even though we’re having a hard time working on a high here, we should remember that just that one little opportunity to get a little bit drugged in, you find you really prefer the drug state. That in and of itself shows how unsatisfactory, how full of suffering ordinary, everyday experience is. Even when it’s normally pretty mild, things go pretty well. Ordinary, everyday state of mind is pretty confined. What the Buddha has to offer is something very different from the drug state, but he does offer something that’s an absolute happiness that doesn’t require any effort once you get there, something you don’t have to do at all. So many of our various states of happiness are things that we have to do, we have to maintain, we have to look after them. No matter how good ordinary happiness is, there’s a part of you that knows all the time it’s not going to last, and you have to prepare yourself for the downslope. But that doesn’t exist at all in the dimension that the Buddha discovered through his practice. So the question is, are you interested in that other dimension? Are you willing to do what’s required? Are you willing to practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma? And put your personal convenience and your personal preferences aside. This is the choice we’re making all the time, whether to shape the Dhamma in line with our preferences or to drop our preferences in favor of the Dhamma. And our practice normally is going back and forth between the two. That’s when you finally get aligned with the Dhamma, and your practice in that direction becomes more and more consistent, more and more second nature. That’s when you really start seeing the results. John Lee talks about the difference between the Noble Eightfold Path and the Worldly Eightfold Path. In the Worldly Path, he says, it’s the one that goes back and forth, sometimes right view, sometimes wrong view, then right view again, then wrong view again. It’s not that the Worldly Path is totally wrong. It’s just that it can’t make up its mind. If you want to get on the Buddha’s path, you have to make up your mind and stick with it. It’s the consistency that makes the difference.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/0308n3b2%20In-line%20Practice.mp3>