High Level Dhamma

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Chan Phuong used to say that the easiest people to teach were the ones who didn’t know too much about the Dhamma. Merchants from town would come out to the monastery, no background in the Dhamma at all, and they were the easiest ones to teach. He’d say, “Do this,” and they’d do that, and when they were further ready for the next step, he’d tell them about the next step. They didn’t know about the next step beforehand, so they didn’t have a lot of preconceived notions about what should happen in their meditation. They were the ones who read a lot, who found that what they were reading often got in the way. Sometimes it was very high-level Dhamma they’d been reading about. They’d sit and look at their minds where they were, and they weren’t quite where the books said they should be. Either they’d get depressed, or else they’d start trying to squeeze their minds into the direction of where the book was, what they’d learned from the book, which is basically just perceptions based on ignorance. As the Chan Lee once said, “Most people mistake low-level Dhamma for high-level Dhamma and high-level Dhamma for low-level Dhamma.” If you read about high-level Dhamma, all it is is just plain perceptions. It’s labels. But when we look at our practice, we see that we’re dealing with very simple greed, anger, and delusion. Anger about this person, frustration about this person. Common, everyday defilements. We don’t want to have to deal with those. We want to go straight for the higher levels. It’s actually these immediate defilements in the present moment. That’s high-level Dhamma. It’s right what you’ve got to deal with right here, right now. That’s the important work. As for the concepts you’ve developed from reading the books, leave that aside. Because it’s not only abstract concepts we’ve picked up from books. Often we read the stories about the famous Sajjans, and it sounds like they were on a straight path to Nirvana. We have to realize that a lot of that is part of the genre. When you write about your teacher in Thailand, you don’t talk about the difficulties they had. You don’t talk about their backsliding. You don’t talk about their frustrations. It’s considered poor form. I found that out when I wrote a Chan Fung’s biography when his body was placed in the mausoleum. People were surprised that I put in some incidents that he told me about times when his practice hadn’t gone well, when he had made mistakes. I thought they were inspiring because, seeing that he had made mistakes, I could look at my own mistakes and not get too flustered by them, realizing that we all make mistakes in the path. Learning about his mistakes and how he’d finally worked his way around them, I found that inspiring. The Thais were surprised that I included that. Some people actually thought I shouldn’t have. So you have to realize, when you’re reading about the famous Sajjans, that they considered poor form to talk about, maybe years ago, when there was frustration. But it’s there. It’s there in everybody’s practice. The important thing is to look at the frustration and look at the problems you’re dealing with right here in the present moment and realize that this is high-level Dhamma right here, because this is what’s there in the immediate present. This is the real thing. The stuff you picked up from books, is concepts, and it’s not yet real. So what we have to do is, when unskillful mind states are arising, learn how to deal with them skillfully. Realize that it is possible. Sometimes it seems like the frustration is taking over the whole mind and there doesn’t seem to be the slightest room for any kind of skillful observer to get in there. That’s not the case. If you look really carefully, you’ll see that these mental states come and go, come and go, come and go. And you can watch. Sometimes that’s all you have to do, is just watch. Sometimes it’s all you can do. You can’t figure anything out. Well, you can always just watch. Always make sure that that observer is there, because that’s what keeps you in touch with what’s actually going on. John Lee once said that this is what the practice is all about, is seeing your defilements. If you don’t see your defilements, if you turn a blind eye, then no matter what else you do in the practice, you’re not really practicing. It’s seeing these issues as they come up, watching them, observing them. Sometimes it takes a long time. But this is, after all, a practice that goes someplace. And even though there may be difficulties and backsliding, this is still a path with an open end, not like the closed-in paths of most people’s lives. And John Mahābhūta tells the story of when he was out in the forest one time and feeling very frustrated about his meditation. And so it happened, it was a holiday, and the people in the village were playing some music and doing whatever else they did on the holiday, making a lot of noise. You could hear the noise way off in the distance. And at first you thought, “Here I am, miserable in the forest, just making myself miserable. Those people at least are having a good time.” But then he came to his senses and said, “Hey, wait a minute. Where are they going in their lives? They’re not going anywhere in particular. Where does all that fun and games take them? It doesn’t take them anywhere. At least the meditation leaves a door open. Whether it’s going well or not going well, the door is there. It’s open.” It’s interesting that there’s almost the identical story, as in the Pali Canon, of a monk who overhears the music coming from a village. One night, on a holiday night, he starts feeling miserable about himself. He says, “They know how to have fun. Here I am, just making myself miserable in the forest.” And this deva comes and appears to him, and she says, “You don’t know how many people envy you. Their lives are totally hemmed in, and they’re heading down to hell many times. So realize that you’re on a path that goes someplace, and even though it may seem to be muddling around, you’re dealing with the real issues right here, right now. And that’s what’s important. They may not seem to be the most inspiring issues, they may not seem to be the issues that you want to deal with, but they’re the ones that are here. They’re the ones that offer themselves to you so you can observe them. This is where the real Dhamma is learned. It’s in the present moment. Where do you think the Buddha learned the Dhamma? He didn’t have books to go by. He just had his ability to observe. Observe what was happening in the present moment. And if it took a long time to observe it, well, he just stuck with it. Not that it was easy. But by watching these things, you have the opportunity to understand them. And when you can understand them, when you comprehend them, you can go beyond them. If you don’t watch them, if you distract yourself with all kinds of other things, the real job never gets done. Your ability to see what the mind is doing to cause itself suffering, that’s where the real Dhamma lies. That’s the First Noble Truth right there, combined with the Second Noble Truth. And if you don’t look at that, there’s no way that the Third and Fourth Noble Truths can do their work. So whatever gets served up in the present moment, think,”This is the high-level Dhamma for right now. This is the actuality. This is the genuine thing right here. What we read about in books is just stories. There’s the story of a monk called Jon Fuan, who was visited by monks who’d gotten their degrees in Pali studies. He was very proud of the fact that they had read all the way through the Vasudhi Magga. Each of the Vasudhi Magga has basically three main sections. There’s the Sila Nidesa, the Samadhi Nidesa, and the Bhajna Nidesa. Nidesa basically means “section” or “chapter.” In Thai, it’s “nithed.” Jon Fuan said, “What do you have in the Vasudhi Magga where there’s the Sila Nidate?” Nidate basically means “nithan” in Thai, which means “fables, stories,” just words about those high-level Dhammas. The real thing, he said, is in your mind right here, right now. Either it’s there or it’s not. The potential for virtue, the potential for concentration, the potential for discernment are all there. But it’s not the case that you go straight to those things without having to muck around with all your defilements, because they’re going to get in the way one way or another. Our habit is to deal unskillfully with whatever comes up. The results of skillful actions are nice, so we tend to get complacent, an unskillful reaction to something that was originally skillful. When things get bad, then we just pile more unskillfulness on top of it, what they call positive feedback loops. Positive in the sense that it just strengthens what’s already there. This is our problem. We tend to approach skillful, the results of skillful action with a negative feedback loop. It can only get so skillful and then we pull it back down. But it seems to be very easy to approach the unskillful things with positive feedback loops, just keep pulling things further and further and further down. This seems to be a habit with us, but it can be unlearned. The only way you can unlearn things is to watch. Watch and then watch again, watch again, and bit by bit by bit. It may not be as fast or as convenient as you’d like it to be, but this is the only way out. Deal with what comes up in the present moment. But it’s not the case that it’s always hard. There are pleasant stretches as well, good stretches. But when you’re stuck in a difficult stretch, that seems to be all there is. But that’s not the case. Look around and see how many things you’re not burdened with right now. Remember the first time I ordained. Immediately after disrobing, there was a sense of weightlessness. I felt like I’d been freed from this huge burden of having to gain awakening. For a while it did feel like freedom, but then I began to realize this is like being in an elevator where the cord is suddenly cut, the cable’s been cut, and there’s a moment of weightlessness, and then you hit the ground. You suddenly realize you’ve got to go out and you’ve got to make a living. You’ve got to deal with the people in ways. You’re not being treated with the same respect you were before. All these other things come crowding in, crowding in, crowding in, and lay life suddenly feels very, very narrow and very confined, as they say in the texts. So learn to have an appreciation of what’s not weighing you down. The Buddha calls that alighting on emptiness. In other words, realizing what disturbances are here, but what disturbances are not here. You don’t add any onto what’s naturally here. You have a sense of the space, the emptiness around the disturbances that are weighing your mind down. You realize there is a lot of space there that you are not appreciating. So take heart. The path is a good path, even though it may seem frustrating. It’s a path that goes someplace. Otherwise, we just wander around aimlessly, as the Buddha said. It’s like throwing a stick up in the air. Sometimes this end comes down and hits the ground. Sometimes the other end hits the ground. Sometimes it comes down and splats. Sometimes it comes out in the middle. There’s no real rhyme or reason to it. There’s no pattern to it at all. The ups and downs of this wandering around go nowhere. But the noble path is one that does go someplace. That’s the whole point. So whether it’s easy or difficult, that’s not the issue. The issue is you’re at least on a path that’s going someplace, going to the end of suffering. It’s going to true freedom. As the Buddha said, if you could get a guarantee that by submitting to a being stabbed with spears a hundred times in the morning, a hundred times at noon, a hundred times in the evening, for a hundred years, day in, day out, day in, day out, every day, but guarantee that you would gain awakening at the end of that time, he said, it would be a good deal. And when the awakening did come, he said, you would not regard that you had won that awakening through pain or suffering. The awakening would have totally blotted out. There wouldn’t have been any sense of pain. It would have been much more than worth it. So here we are, stabbing ourselves with metal spears. But we don’t have to. We don’t have to add suffering on top to whatever unskillful states are already there. Just learn to watch and watch again, watch again. Learn to be comfortable with the fact that you have the time and you have the space and the opportunity to watch. So many people don’t even have that opportunity at all. They spend their time instead painting pictures about what high-level Dhamma they’ve attained or going to attain or whatever, but it’s just all pictures. Here you’re grappling with the real thing. That’s what the Dhamma is. It’s the real thing. So you’ve got everything you need right here. Whether it’s the lesson you want to learn, that’s not the issue. It’s the lesson that’s presenting itself to be learned. And obviously it’s a lesson you need to learn or else it wouldn’t be there. And you’ve got the time and the opportunity. And through the Dhamma, you’ve got the guidance on how to work your way through. And whether it’s fast or slow, that’s not the issue. It’s the fact that you’re working with it. That’s what matters.

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