Purity

November 2, 2004

Some of the discourses the Buddha talks about are vast stretches of time, the rise and fall not only of empires but also whole universes. And for a teaching that focuses on the present moment, this may seem strange. But at the end of all of his accounts, either going way back into the past, about how this particular universe began, or going on into the future, how human society is going to degenerate to the point where they have what they call a sword interval. And then civilization begins to regenerate to the time of the next Buddha. Each of these accounts ends with a reminder of the principle of karma, that all of these things—the rise and fall of empires, the rise and fall of human society, the rise and fall of the universe—is shaped by action. And where is action happening? It’s happening right here, right now, right in front of your nose. In fact, it’s closer than your nose. The actions, the intentions you have in your mind. So the message always comes back to right here, right now. And the purpose of laying out that broad spectrum, that broad panorama of you and society, of the universe, is to remind you of why the present moment is important. Because what you do right here, right now, is going to shape not only the present moment but on into the future. So you should pay very careful attention to that. Oftentimes we feel our lives are shaped by the events that happen around us, the things that other people do. And to an extent, that’s true. But the important factor is what you do with the events that are presented to you. It’s like being dealt a hand of cards in a card game. You don’t have much control over which cards are dealt to you, but you do have control over how you’re going to play them. This is where the Buddha focuses his teachings. His teachings on suffering focus on not the suffering that comes from the body, the suffering that comes from what other people do, but the suffering that you’re creating for yourself right here, right now. And if you can learn to stop that, he says, then the other suffering doesn’t matter, doesn’t reach into you, doesn’t touch you. So we have to develop this as our attitude, an attitude that doesn’t depend on conditions. All too often, when things get difficult outside, people say, “Well, precepts are nice for when things are comfortable but now things are different.” Well, they’re never different. The reason the precepts are presented in such stark, clear terms is that they’re easy to remember when you’re at least likely to remember them. It’s like before you go into the wilderness, they drum it into your head again and again and again. If you go up to Alaska, you’ll see signs all over the place. They call it bear awareness. Teaching all those dumb people from the lower forty-eight that you’re up in an area where there are lots of bears, and this is their home, and you have to learn how to live with them. The first principle in living with them is, if a bear charges you, don’t run. Your immediate reaction, if you see something like that running at you, is to run away. So they state it very clearly. Don’t run. Keep it clear, short. It’s the same with the precepts. The precepts say against killing, stealing, having illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants. They’re not designed for you to sit around and discuss in classrooms. They’re to be put to use when you’re most tempted to steal or kill or go against any of the other precepts, and when you have all the best rationalizations in the world. These things are meant to be timeless, that all the Buddhist teachings are timeless. He formulated them in such a way that they don’t depend on being in India or they don’t depend on being in Thailand. They’re here for human beings wherever they are. The principles of happiness are simple. The principles for creating suffering are simple as well. But we tend to take circumstances, outside circumstances, the time and the location, and give them too much importance. But we should remember that what we’re doing right now is going to shape our lives through a series of principles that don’t change. The principles of cause and effect, the law of karma. So how are you going to play the hand that you’ve been dealt? Sometimes you’re dealt a good hand, sometimes you’re dealt a bad hand. But whatever the hand, you’ve got to learn how to play it the best you can. Always be aware of the fact that it would be better if you didn’t have to play the hands that other people deal to you. If you could find a happiness that didn’t require playing, that wasn’t subject to outside influences. So learning to play your hand in that direction is the best way to play your hand. I was thinking about this today. We were down there sorting out persimmons to send to Thailand. It was a very simple kind of pleasure, a very pure kind of pleasure. Sorting out perfect persimmons to send to the king. At the very beginning of the job, we had lots of time. There was no rush, there was no hurry. You could sit there and simply enjoy what you’re doing. The persimmons were pretty, the sky was cloudless, and it was a pleasant task. There was almost something timeless about the task. It was like you could be back in India thousands of years ago, sorting out persimmons for a king. It was a nice kind of happiness. There was an element of the aesthetic there. Everything was very pretty. And the ethical. The person we were sending the persimmons to was a good person. We were being generous. It was an act of generosity. We weren’t sorting out persimmons to eat ourselves. It was to give to somebody we respect. But as the day wore on and the time became more and more important, we started to realize that the king’s boxes were carefully sealed away. Then the persimmons that were going to go to other places, the blemishes that we wouldn’t have accepted before, well, just throw them in the box. Nobody’s going to really care. It doesn’t make a difference in the persimmons. The attitude just got less pure, less simple, and more hounded by the press of time. When you stop to think about that kind of pleasure, that particular kind of pleasure depends on so many things. The economy, the political system, the availability of the water, the climate, the fact that fire didn’t ravage our monastery this year. We’ve come through another year of the fire season. It’s a simple happiness. It’s a nice happiness, but it’s so dependent on conditions and it’s so frail. It serves as a reminder that you want to find something that’s not dependent. Kierkegaard, a Christian thinker, once divided life into three types of pursuits. We call them three stages in life’s way. There’s the aesthetic and the ethical, and then there’s the spiritual or the religious. The aesthetic approach is taking the hand that you’ve been dealt and letting it out in really pretty patterns. The ethical approach is taking the hand you’re dealt and trying to do the most honorable thing. The religious approach, though, is taking the hand you’re dealt and trying to deal it into something that’s not conditioned. That’s what we’re working on here as we meditate. We’re trying to play our hand in such a way that ultimately we’re not dealt hands anymore, but we’ve got a happiness that doesn’t depend on conditions. It depends on either the hand dealt to us or our skill in playing it. That’s the goal. But in the meantime, we have to learn the proper skill and take the proper direction. The elements in the Eightfold Path, taken separately, can be seen as a kind of karma that leads to nice rebirths. But when you put them together in a particular way, they lead someplace else. They lead to the end of karma. That’s why they require practice. It’s getting them together just right. This element of just right, the middleness of the path, is what we’re working on all the time. The basic elements are pretty simple. When we’re sitting here meditating, you’ve got your awareness and you’ve got your breath, your mindful alert, and there’s an element of effort. At some point in the hour, all those things are going to be there, but they may not be properly balanced, which is why they don’t give the result we want. So you try to balance them again and balance them again, and you work on strengthening all of them. Sometimes it’s easy to get discouraged, but you’ve got to remember, if you give up, where are you going to be left? Back in situations that are totally dependent on the hand that’s dealt to you and whatever skill you can remember and how to play your hand. But now you have the opportunity to play the hand in a different way. So try to make the most of it. Giving a whole life to this practice is not giving too much, because it’s not a path that saves all of its pleasures for the end. So many people think of the special side, the ascetic side, of what we’re doing as being a real deprivation. But there is a very definite pleasure in having as few wants and as few responsibilities, as few things tying you down as possible, and having, as the choice is presented to you, are you going to do this noble act or are you going to do that noble act? As opposed to the choices that are commonly given out there, which is, are you going to do this ignoble act or that ignoble one? Being in this position in and of itself is a real luxury. So you want to make the most of it. The Buddha keeps reminding you that aging, illness, and death can come at any time. And once you reflect on it, not to get depressed or discouraged, but simply to keep you on your toes, keep you dedicated to what you know your best interests are. In this case, it’s your own best interests that are also in the interests of everybody else. The more pure you can make your mind, the better it is for the rest of the whole world. There’s a lot out there that you can’t control, but this is something you can work on. This is something where you can have an influence, where you can make the difference. This is why it’s good to devote all your efforts right here. As the Buddha told Rahula, how do you purify your mind? By looking at what you’re doing. You’re engaging in what its effects are going to be, and if you see they’re going to be harmful, you don’t do them. It’s a very simple process. Check your actions while you’re doing them. If they’re causing harm, you stop. Look at your actions after they’re done. If they have caused harm, resolve not to do them again. If they haven’t caused harm, take joy in the practice. Keep yourself dedicated to it. This is how people purify themselves, purify their thoughts, purify their minds. That kind of purity also leads to a pure happiness—pure not only in the sense of being totally harmless, but totally unalloyed, not the least bit of conditionality touching it. In some spots, the Buddha calls this “leaving the holy life pure as a polished shell.” That purity in and of itself, not only of the goal but also of the path, contains a great element of pleasure as well. So remember to stay focused right here, focused on what you’re doing, no matter what else the world does. The world has to go its way in line with its karma, in line with the karma of each individual being. Your best way to influence the world is by working on what you’re doing right now, to make it as pure as possible.

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