In-line with the Dhamma

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There was once a senior monk from Bangkok who went to see Ajahn Mun and said, “Here you are living out in the forest. What do you do when you have problems in terms of understanding the Dharma? Who do you go ask?” He said, “I live in Bangkok with lots of very well-known wise men. Sometimes I run into questions that even they can’t answer. What do you do? You’re all alone in the forest.” And the story behind the question is that this particular monk was not all that impressed with Ajahn Mun. So the question was something of a taunt. But Ajahn Mun’s response was, “I hear the Dharma all day long. Twenty-four hours a day, except when I’m asleep. As soon as anything comes into contact with the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, there’s Dharma being proclaimed.” In other words, the Dharma is always there, if only we’ll listen to it, if only we practice it. The problem is, we don’t listen. We’d much rather listen to our own delusions. This is a comment that Ajahn Fung made one time. He said, “People don’t like to hear the truth. They’d much rather be lied to. And part of them knows they’re being lied to, but they like it, because that means they can get away with lying to themselves. They don’t like running up against the truth. Of course, as a result, they suffer. We suffer. We suffer because we fool ourselves. We delude ourselves. We do things that we would like to have lead to happiness, but they don’t lead to happiness.” There’s that old story about the man eating a whole bushel of peppers and crying. And people say, “Why are you crying? Why are you eating those peppers?” He said, “I’m looking for the sweet one.” And even when we know that peppers are hot, we’re still looking for the sweet one. We do the same things over and over again, hoping they’ll lead to happiness, maybe next time. They didn’t do it last time, but maybe next time. That’s basic human attitude. The mind is used to lying to itself, and this is why it’s so easy for advertisers to lie to us. They’ve learned all the tricks that the mind plays on itself, and they’ve used them to make us happy to be lied to. Because if we really looked at our lives, we’d find it really discouraging that we’ve spent so much effort, so much time, with so little to show for it. And so we like hanging around people who have the same delusions that we do. They don’t get questioned. They don’t make us look at how little we have to show for it, which is why we’re one of the healthiest things you can do, to go to a place where people have different assumptions. Especially if you can find some people who have learned to look at the truth about what really does cause suffering and what really is the way out of suffering. It may be difficult. It may be hard, this way that they’ve practiced, but it’s bracing. It’s good for us to learn that truth, because it’s the only way out. It’s the only way to get over our delusions and actually stop causing suffering for ourselves. This is why every time we have descriptions in the texts about people getting awakened, getting freedom from suffering, they have to go through stages of disenchantment and dispassion. The Buddha talked about the principle of practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. It’s an important principle. In one place he said it’s the way you really show respect for the Buddha, not with flowers and incense and candles, but by actually putting what he taught into practice. He also states, though, that what does it mean to practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma? It means practicing for the sake of dispassion, learning to see through all the things that we’ve been doing and realizing that we’ve been causing ourselves unnecessary suffering. But it means dismantling a lot of our illusions, in particular a lot of our illusions about ourselves and who we are. Just look at your assumption about who you are. What’s it made out of? It’s made out of forms and feelings and perceptions and thought constructs and the acts of consciousness. That’s it. We’ve cobbled our sense of self out of these things. And when you actually look at them, there’s really not that much there. They’re things that keep changing and changing and changing. How can we find any sense of real stability out of these things, out of our constructs, when the raw materials themselves are changing? It’s like building a house out of something you thought was solid, but when you really look at it carefully, you realize it’s frozen meat. As soon as the sun comes out, as soon as it warms up, it’s going to start thawing. When it thaws, the whole thing is going to fall down. Then you turn and look at things outside that you hope and depend on for your happiness. You see that they’re very inconstant, stressful, and undependable. We don’t like to see that. As long as we practice the Dhamma not wanting to see that, we’re not practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. We practice the Dhamma for the sake of dispassion, because it’s good for us, in the sense that it really does lead to happiness. If you can learn to just give up your delusions, give up your illusions about what’s going to make you happy, all your other assumptions about what’s going to make you happy, it’s demanding. As I said, it’s not only giving up your illusions about things outside, but also your illusions about who you are, what really belongs to you, what really is worthwhile in life. But the rewards are great, as the Buddha said. Dispassion is the highest Dhamma. There’s a passage where he divides Dhamma into two types. There’s fabricated and unfabricated. He says the highest fabricated Dhamma is the no-bladeful path. That leads to the highest unfabricated, which is dispassion. This is important. We don’t just decide we’re going to give up any interest in anything at all and think that’ll get us where we want to go. That’s just like dying. You first have to be interested in the path. Practice the path. Put it into practice. Day in, day out, see which of the factors that you’re not really clear on, which ones you’re not really putting into practice, and adjust your practice so it falls in line with the path. Make sure your efforts are the right effort. If you see anything unskillful in your mind, put an end to it. Also develop a desire to put an end to it. Talk yourself into it. See why it’s a good thing, why you don’t want to side with your moments of greed, anger, and delusion. So that you actually have some enthusiasm for the path. The same with working on developing mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. Develop enthusiasm for these things because they are good things. They’re useful in all kinds of activities. The Buddha talks about desire as being an important element in right effort. It’s the kind of desire you have to go through, you have to develop first before dispassion is actually healthy dispassion. So if you’re setting it out into practice and feel tired or feel discouraged or feel bored about the whole thing, do what you can to make it interesting. Do what you can to make it intriguing. This process of learning to understand the mind, learning to understand the breath energy in the body, how can you use that breath energy as an aid in your practice? Develop an interest in it. Let it capture imagination. The road to dispassion has to lead through desire and imagination skillfully applied. Not imagination in the sense of sitting here and thinking up ideas or thinking up little worlds for the mind to entertain itself with. It’s imagination in seeing that you’ve got these raw materials. You’ve got the breath, you’ve got the body. In the past, you’ve made a lot of unskillful things out of this. How can you make something skillful out of it that actually leads away from suffering? Let that challenge capture your imagination. Finally, when the path is fully developed, that’s when it leads you to healthy dispassion. You’ve just helped develop something really good with the mind. You’ve looked at all the other unskillful things you’ve been doing with your thoughts and words and deeds and realized that you don’t want to go there anymore. You’ve got something better. Then you use the path to develop to dispassion all other things aside from the path itself. Then you turn and look at the path itself. It, too, is something put together. It’s something jerry-rigged. But at least it’s delivered you to the spot where you want to be. You develop dispassion for that. What’s left is the deathless. The problem is you can develop passion for the deathless. You learn how to develop dispassion for that as well. Everything gets, as I say, given back. All the things you laid claim to as your own, even the idea of laying claim to your experience of something unconditioned, give that up as well. Let go of that as well, because you see that that, too, can be a burden on the mind, the last thing that stands between you and total awakening, total freedom. Lots of passages in the Canon, after talking about dispassion as the highest dharma, talk about going beyond both passion and dispassion. In other words, anything that can be described, you let go. That’s where the path of practicing the dharma, in line with the dharma, leads. Total freedom through the doorways of the path, and the elements of desire and imagination you need on the path, then dispassion, and then relinquishing even dispassion. Seeing through all your illusions, and then even letting go of things that are not illusions. There’s nothing you have to carry around from that point on. That’s the point when the mind is totally free of illusions. It doesn’t cause any suffering for itself or for anybody at all. But it requires that you look very carefully at the things that you hold most dear, and that when you run into a truth, you learn how to accept it for a truth, learn how to listen to the dharma 24 hours a day. It’s there all the time, proclaiming itself. These things are inconstant, stressful, not self. Craving is always causing suffering. Ignorance is always causing suffering. It’s happening all the time. The reason we don’t see it is because we’re more content with our illusions. But it means we’re also content with the suffering. We have to learn how to put these two facts together and realize it’s time to wake up. Because it’s only then that you get any real freedom. So when you run into anything in the path that’s difficult to do, just remind yourself that the difficulty is not insurmountable. This is an important part of wisdom, an important part of our discernment. This relates to something really basic. As the Buddha once said, there are four kinds of activities in life. Things that we like to do and give good results. Things we don’t like to do and give bad results. Those are no-brainers. The difficult ones are the things that we like to do and give bad results, and the things we don’t like to do but give good results. The measure of our wisdom and discernment is our ability to talk ourselves into doing the things that will give good results, even though we don’t like doing them, and not doing the things that we like to do but we know will give bad results. It sounds very basic. It’s a lesson that every little child has to learn, but we never seem to learn it. We like to think the reason that we haven’t gained awakening is because discernment involves some very abstract and very difficult and subtle matters. And there’s a subtlety to it, but it’s a subtlety to something so basic that we don’t connect our actions with their results. For some reason, we like to hide them, hide that connection. That’s our big delusion. It’s nothing far away, nothing abstract. It’s just the way the mind lies to itself all the time. But if you really don’t want to suffer, that should be your impetus to look carefully at your actions and their results and don’t give up. Give any room for delusion, because the problem with living in delusion is that it’s always going to be threatened by reality. But if you learn how to admit reality, act in line with the way things actually are, there’s nothing threatening. You’re not building anything that’s going to be washed away by the waves. The path you build will be a solid path, and it will take you to some place. Something’s even more solid that doesn’t have to be built at all. Once the mind is totally with the truth and is totally truth-telling to itself, nothing anywhere of any kind can threaten it in any way.

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