Worldly Dhammas

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One of the important parts about staying in a monastery like this is that it gets you outside of the normal concerns of society. Gain, status, praise, physical pleasure have a lot less meaning here than they do out there. So when you can stay in a place where those things don’t have much meaning, you get a better perspective on them. These things are called worldly dhammas. They’re the basic qualities that make up the world. This is how the world functions. Material gain, status, praise, physical pleasure. These are the things that grease human society. And when you look at it, that’s pretty much all human society has to offer. The problem is, it has the opposites to offer as well. Where there’s gain, there’s going to be loss. Status, there’s loss of status. Where there’s praise, there’s going to be criticism and censure. Where there’s pleasure, there’s going to be pain. And you can’t have the good side without the bad side. The problem is, when the good side comes, we tend to identify with it. Which means that when the bad side comes, we have to identify with that as well. So it’s good to come to a place where those identifications, those identities, really don’t mean anything. One of the things I always appreciated about being in a monastery like this and being with the Jon Foo, the monastery and the riyong, it was like it was a large extended family. And there were some very wealthy supporters and some very poor supporters. Some people would come, they’d quit their work in a very low job in a factory someplace, drive out, and they didn’t have much money to offer, but they had their labor, they had their strength, so they’d offer that. But everybody was welcome, and it was like a large extended family. The very wealthy people, the very poor people, the people with rank, the people with no rank at all. When they came to the monastery, all that stuff was set aside, and they’re all part of the family. In fact, that was one of the good features about having the monastic sangha in Thailand as a whole. There was always an alternative society, where, in its better centers, the things that had a lot of meaning in lay life didn’t have any meaning at all. And as a result, people could go to a place where their ordinary, everyday identities didn’t matter, didn’t hold, which made it a lot easier to see that these ordinary, everyday things are simply roles that you play. And you could learn to see the whole thing as a game. What’s even better is if you can maintain that perspective even while you’re in the middle of the game. This is what meditation does. It gets you in touch with a different kind of reality or a different level of reality. It’s like tuning your radio into a different station. The breath, this energy flow in the body, what does it know of gain? What does it know of status? What does it know of praise or criticism? Any of those worldly affairs. It keeps coming in, going out. The subtle breath sensations keep moving around the body. And it can be totally unaffected by any of that other stuff. When you keep in touch with it, when you keep tuned into it, it helps you pull out of those identities that hold fast to, “This is my status. This is my seniority. This is my material wealth. This is my role in society. This is where the sense of”my role” begins to bleed over into “me.” But if you stay in touch with the breath or any of the other elements in the body—warmth, which is just the fire element, which is the warmth, the water element, which is the feelings of coolness that permeate through the body, or the sense of solidity, the earth element, space, both around the body and permeating between the atoms, or simply the element of consciousness—when you look at things simply as elements or as elementary sensations like this, the beats of the world or the affairs of the world seem far away. The trick is to be able to maintain this level of awareness in all your activities so that you begin to look at the affairs of the world not so much as being yours, but simply as things that come your way and you can learn how to use them. Gain has its uses. Loss also has its uses. It’s great for developing a sense of sanghvega, a sense of dispassion. When gain comes, you can use it to be generous, to develop good qualities of the mind. Rather than identifying with it, you can see, “Where does it come from? Where does it go? And in the meantime, what use can I get out of it?” Because you can come right down to it. These things are not really yours. You have money, and it doesn’t have your picture on it as George Washington or Ben Franklin. You gain status. It’s something that people give to you and it’s something people can take away. It’s even clearer with praise and criticism. It comes out of their mouths. So you can step back a bit so you have a different perspective on these things and you can begin to see, “Okay, gain is good for this, but you have to watch out for that. This is good for this.” All the way down through all four pairs, they all have their uses. You learn to see them as part of a causal chain. Pleasure comes from this and leads to that. If you get stuck on it, it’s going to lead to certain states of mind. If you learn how to use the pleasure as a means of getting the mind to settle down, then it can have another effect, a more useful one. The same with pain. The Buddha said that pain is a noble truth. It’s something that you can learn a lot from. When you can look at both sides in this way, then you don’t get elated when the good side comes and depressed when the bad side comes. You simply realize, “Okay, the pendulum has swung in this direction and this is what you get.” You gain from it when it’s in that direction. When it’s in the other direction, you get to gain other things. It’s a lot easier to maintain this perspective, one, when you have a monastery like this to come to, or you can go out into the wilds, and two, when you can carry this perspective around with you. Just get in touch with the breath. Get in touch with the other elements in the body. The Buddha has a passageway. He talks about the wind element. When the wind blows disgusting things, does the wind get disgusted? No, it just blows them around. When it blows fragrant things, does it get excited and enchanted? No, it just blows them around. The same with water, fire, and earth. The fire can burn disgusting things or fragrant things, but the fire doesn’t care. When you throw disgusting things on the earth, the earth doesn’t wrinkle up, pull away in disgust. When you use water to wash things away, the water doesn’t care whether they’re clean or not clean, nice or not nice. Try to tune your mind into that. The Buddha says, “Make your mind in tune with the breath.” Make your mind in tune with fire, water, and earth. You can make it in tune with space or the simple knowing quality in the mind. If you can maintain this basis, maintain this state, this type of perception, it really frees you from a lot of unskillful behavior and a lot of unnecessary distractions. It frees you from unnecessary ups and downs. So do your best to learn how to tune in to this level and stay tuned in. It’s good that you can pull out every now and then, but if you can stay here all the time, you’ve really got the advantage. The ways of the world can spin around you, but you don’t get sucked in. When they spin around, it’s not just like ball bearings spinning around. It’s more like gears. They spin around, and if you get your shirt caught or your sleeve caught, they pull you in, pull you in, and can kill you. But if nothing gets caught in them, then you’re perfectly safe. The breath doesn’t get sucked in. It doesn’t get caught. So stay with the breath. Make the mind in tune with the breath. Then nothing can pull you in, and nothing can cause you harm.

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