Sophisticated Dhamma

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There’s an interesting term in the Pali Canon, satama bhattirupa, which is usually translated as “counterfeit dharma” or “imitation dharma.” What’s interesting about it is the word bhattirupa means “sophisticated.” Sometimes dharma gets too sophisticated for its own good, maybe because it sounds prettier or it sounds more profound. Then the problem is that it starts replacing the true dharma. It’s like counterfeit gold. Once there’s counterfeit gold around, you can’t tell which one is which. Which is real gold, which is counterfeit. When it gets difficult to tell the two apart, then, as he says, real gold disappears. In other words, the sense of trust, the sense of conviction, the sense of security you have that you’ve got the real thing. Just like when people start spreading lies. If they’re insistent on holding to their lies, people begin to wonder, “Well, who’s telling the truth?” Then it becomes an issue of, “Well, it’s this person’s version versus that person’s version.” And the conviction that you really are listening to the truth, that you really do have the facts, gets weaker and weaker. When that conviction gets weaker, then it has its toll on the practice. There’s one sutta where the Buddha is talking to Mahagassapa, commenting on the whole issue of true dharma and counterfeit dharma or sophisticated dharma. He says there are five qualities that help maintain the true dharma. Five kinds of respect. Respect for the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Respect for the training. Respect for concentration. Respect for the training covers all main parts of the training. Virtue, concentration, discernment. It’s interesting to think about why the Buddha added respect for concentration. It’s included in the training. But why did he single that out as being the most important of the three? It’s because we tend not to respect it. Some people might have thought, “Well, respect for vipassana or respect for insight.” But no, respect for concentration. One, because it’s probably the hardest of the factors of the path. It requires a lot of effort and a lot of persistence just to stick with that one object. Sometimes it seems that focusing on the breath is like trying to balance a ball bearing on the tip of a needle. It just keeps falling off, falling off, falling off. So you have to have a lot of respect for the potential of concentration to keep at it. The other part of the problem is that we tend to overlook concentration. We all have concentration to some extent in our minds. Our ability to follow a dharma talk is a kind of concentration. The comprehension of a whole sentence, to comprehend a whole paragraph, takes a certain level of concentration. It’s called momentary concentration in the commentaries. But it’s a kind of concentration we all have. Yet it doesn’t seem like much. We tend to overlook it. When we’re sitting here and meditating, we say, “Well, in right concentration, there’s got to be rapture, there’s got to be pleasure. Where is the rapture and the pleasure?” Or sometimes we feel there has to be a sensation of light or we have to have visions. “Well, where is the light? Where are the visions?” What you’ve got isn’t good enough, and so you throw it away. You trample all over it. It’s actually the concentration you already have that has to be allowed to grow. The same with a sense of ease or fullness in the body. The potential for these things is already there. It’s just that in breathing we tend to squeeze it or push it or trample on it. And so it doesn’t have a chance to grow. So take whatever little sense you have of ease, concentration, a sense that things are okay, and preserve that, maintain that. Notice when you tend to squeeze it and try to breathe in such a way that you don’t squeeze it. Just let it be. Jon Foong often uses the word perkong, which is the word they use when a child is trying to walk and it’s still not very steady on its feet. So the parent hovers around the child. You don’t hold the child’s hand because you want the child to get the chance to walk and develop its own sense of balance, but you hold your hands out on either side in case the child falls. That’s perkong. Once you try to perkong, the mind with the breath, and whatever sense of ease there is in the body, try to perkong that as well. That sense of attention and not pushing things, but protecting them. That’s what gives the concentration a chance to grow. Another problem with respect to concentration, of course, is once you’ve got it, then you say, “Well, okay, what’s next?” Or you drop it for the least little thing, whether it’s fear or lust or anger or boredom. As soon as something more interesting comes along, you drop the concentration and run with whatever comes along. Of course, many of those things that come along are actually troublemakers that are going to lead you to problems. Part of you knows that, but at least it’s more interesting or you feel it’s more important. You’ve really got to work on that attitude that it really is safer to stay with a concentration. You’re less likely to do or say or think things that are going to get you into trouble. It’s actually more interesting to stay here because once you can stay with a concentration, you start seeing the movements of the mind for what they actually are. Rather than getting swept along in the momentum, you see how the mind creates issues, stitches things together. Like a bird’s nest, whatever the bird can pick up gets woven into the nest. Yarn, bits of string. Pieces of carpet. Whatever it can grab, hold it. Then it’s all pretty random. Just because something comes barging into the mind doesn’t mean that it’s really important. It just happens to bubble up at that particular point. Like swamp gas bubbling up out of a swamp. If you can learn to view your thoughts this way, see how jerry-rigged they are, how deceptive they are, that’s one way of pulling yourself out of them so you don’t get so absorbed in them. You don’t get so fascinated. You don’t get carried away with the emotions. Learn to appreciate the sense of ease and solidity that comes with a concentration. It may not have a lot of bright lights, but it does give you a good solid basis. It gives you a firm place to stay. And there is a very nourishing sense of well-being that depends on concentration. You need that in order to stay sane. So learn to protect that. Learn to percon the concentration. The other problem, of course, with respect to concentration is that old issue, “Well, what’s next? I’ve gotten this far. What’s the next step? Let’s be quick about this. After all, I don’t have that much time. I’m a layperson with a lot of responsibilities. The laypeople think that. The monks feel,”I’ve got to get on to the next step. I can’t get stuck here.” The Buddha very rarely talks about the issues of being stuck in concentration. When he gave instructions to the monks, he said, “Go practice jhana.” He didn’t say, “Don’t go do vipassana. Go practice jhana.” He said, “It’s through the practice of jhana that you develop both insight and tranquility.” In other words, when you’re trying to keep the mind still, that’s the best time to see the movements of the mind, because you’ve got something certain and you’ve got something fixed against which to compare other things. Then it’s simply a matter of learning how to bring that state of concentration, that absorption, into every aspect of your life, every situation. In other words, you’re going to have to say “no” to more and more and more of your old habits. It’s in saying “no” to your old habits that you’re going to start understanding them. It’s like learning about a child. If you indulge a child in all of its wishes, you never really learn what’s going on. Why does a child want that? Well, say “no” to it and it’ll start arguing with them, “But I need it for this, that, and the other reason.” Then you can begin to see which are the good reasons and which are the stupid ones, which are the ones you want to encourage and which are the ones you don’t. This is one very important principle in learning about the mind and seeing exactly where your defilements are. If you don’t say “no” to the mind, everything seems to flow and there’s no problem at all. Who says there is such a thing as defilement? That part of the mind that even resists having any of its thoughts called defilements? That’s what it’ll say. But if you learn to say “no,” say, “I’m going to stay right here. I’m not going to run out with whatever. The latest thought, the latest idea, the latest urge or emotion. I’m going to stay right here.” The mind is going to start squirming and it’s going to start complaining. When it starts complaining, that’s when you start seeing, “Oh, this is what motivated that urge to begin with.” Then you can start to see whether the reasons are good or not. And don’t be too quick to say, “Oh, that’s a good reason.” Keep probing, probing, saying “no,” saying “no” until you’re really sure, one hundred percent sure, “Okay, this really is a skillful intention. There’s something worth following through with.” It’s a lot easier to say “no” when you’ve got a good place to stay, a good solid foundation where there is a sense of ease, there is a sense of mindfulness to minimize the hunger to go running. This way you help maintain the true Dhamma, not only in the world at large, but in particular in your own thoughts, words, and deeds, by showing respect for concentration, putting in whatever effort is needed to attain it, and then once you’ve got it, keeping up the effort to maintain it, to keep it going, and using it in every area of life. That becomes your touchstone so you can tell which is the genuine goal and which is the counterfeit, which is genuine Dhamma and which is sophisticated Dhamma. Basically, you can tell when the mind is telling itself the truth and when it’s lying to itself. That’s what it comes down to. The more you respect the principle of concentration, the better position you’ll be in to see.

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