Give It Your All

August 24, 2005

Some passages in the Canon describe what’s called or translated as the graduated discourse or the gradual discourse or the progressive discourse. It’s a series of topics that the Buddha used to bring his listeners to the Four Noble Truths. What’s strange is that we don’t have any complete record of any example of that discourse. It’s described as if the Buddha taught about this, then he taught about that, and then finally, when the person was ready, he taught the Four Noble Truths. But we don’t have an example of how he went from one topic to the other. Still, it’s useful to see the general outline of where the Buddha started. When he was going to introduce his teachings, he didn’t start with a description of the universe or what we might think of, say, as philosophers’ first principles. He started with generosity. He started with something that you do. He wanted to hook into the listeners’ experience of what it’s like to have been generous. What is your experience of generosity in the past? Then from that point, lead you into the Dhamma. What is your experience of generosity? On the one hand, there’s the generosity you’ve received from other people, starting with your parents. If they hadn’t been generous with you, you’d be dead. From the very beginning. If you’ve been a parent yourself, you realize exactly how much work goes into raising a child, how much sleep you have to be deprived of, and all the other hardships and sacrifices that go into raising a child. That’s the way the Buddha expresses it in what he calls the mundane level of right view. The very first thing he says is, “There is what is given.” In other words, these gifts are real. It’s not something that magically appears on its own or is simply the result of predetermined causes. Your parents have to make that decision to give, and they really do sacrifice. From there, you can think of the generosity of other people—your teachers, anybody who’s helped you out of the goodness of their hearts. The more you think about it, the more you realize how much of the goodness of other people you’ve been depending on. You can think about the gift that the Buddha gave, all those lifetimes devoted to discovering the Dhamma, so he could teach it to other people. And all the hardships he went through, both in trying to find the Dhamma and then those forty-five years of teaching it. That’s a gift that keeps showing its results up to now. So on the one hand, you’re familiar with generosity for having been on the receiving end. Of course, there’s the other side of generosity as well. One of the hardest lessons to learn as a child is that by giving something away you’re going to get something even better in return. But it’s basically where your spiritual life begins, realizing there’s something more important than clenching onto that little toy or that little piece of food. You notice when Thai parents come here with their tiny children, the first thing they teach them to do is how to place their hands in respect, and then the second thing is how to grab a spoon and put some rice in the monk’s bowls. In the beginning, it’s mechanical, but after a while, the child gets the message. It’s good to be generous. In fact, you’re not going to get anything in life that’s really important unless you learn to be generous. So the Buddha takes these experiences as the beginning of his teaching. You’ve received a lot of generosity and you’ve learned from being generous. And that’s how the practice begins. His comment on how we can learn to be generous and how wisdom begins is related directly to this. Wisdom, he says, comes from going to a contemplative and asking, “What, when I do, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” This question grows out of being generous. You’ve learned that by giving up certain things you’ll get greater happiness in return. And you want to follow that principle through to see how far it goes. So think about these things as you meditate and as you follow all the other aspects of the practice. On the one hand, you have to remind yourself that you’re here because of the generosity of other people. Especially here at the monastery, everything we’ve got is the result of somebody’s generosity. So you should behave in a way that’s in line with that fact. When you’re feeling lazy, when you’re feeling discouraged, think of all the help you’ve gotten along the way. And one of your ways of repaying that help is to practice. Second thing to reflect on is, if you don’t give yourself to the practice, you’re not going to get anywhere. If you don’t give of your time, of your energy, if you don’t put some effort into the practice when it’s hard, you’ll never get any special results. In our society of entitlement, a lot of people feel they can just sort of take it easy and things will come their way. Things should come their way. And when things don’t come their way, then they start complaining. But that’s not Dharma practice. Dharma practice is the realization that you’ve still got a lot of work to do with your mind. There are still a lot of areas where you could be kinder to yourself and other people, provide more happiness for yourself and for other people, but you’ve got to give of some of the things you have. What have you got here? You’ve got your body, you’ve got your speech, you’ve got your mind. You give your body the practice. You sit and meditate longer than you might want to. You walk in meditation longer than you might want to. You’re more careful about your speech than you ordinarily might be. And you learn how to ride herd on your mind, learning how to observe when to encourage it, when to rein it in. In other words, give yourself fully to the practice. If you hold a lot back, then the results are not going to come. If you give of yourself, the results do come. This principle of looking at the practice as, on the one hand, being the result of gifts you receive for others and, secondly, as a gift that you give of yourself, is an important perspective to maintain at all times. Remember that as you practice here, you’re providing an example for other people as well. You don’t have to look very far. Just look at the way we bow. Someone comes here and is sloppy in his or her bowing, and then the next guest comes along and picks up the sloppy bowing from that person and just goes on down the line. And the same with the senior monks. By “senior” here, I mean the people who have been here longer than the very last person at the end of the row. People further on down the line pick up habits from people who are further up the line, good and bad. That’s an immediate impact that you can have. You can see that and the impact goes further on. So try to look at the practice as part of a network of gifts, the gifts you receive and the gifts that you can give to others. There’s been so much Mahayana propaganda on how Theravada is selfish and narrow-hearted, but you can’t find any of that in the teachings or in the practice. One of the motivations for monks to keep on practicing, to become arahants, is so that the gifts that they receive from people, in terms of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine, will give great results to those people. So part of the motivation is not only for yourself but also for the people around you. And you go visit Mahayana communities. You go visit Theravada countries. And it’s not the case that the people in the Mahayana countries are any kinder or more generous. And you notice that if you come to the practice with the idea that you’re doing this just for yourself, it tends to grind to a halt pretty fast. But if you look at it as part of a network of gifts, you’ve received gifts and you want to pass some on. And to get the results in the practice, you’ve got to give of yourself. Try things out. That’s another thing that’s notable about the way the Buddha introduced his teachings to people. He starts with recommendations about how to do something. He doesn’t lay out a picture of the universe, saying, “Well, this is the way the universe is. Therefore, x, y, z.” The truths he teaches are different kinds of truths, truths of actions, or pragmatic truths. And they’re tested by putting them into practice. Try giving and see what happens. Try being virtuous and see what happens. Try meditating and see what happens. That’s the only way you can really test the Buddha’s teachings. Put them into practice and see what results you get. And everything he taught about levels of being and samsara, the bigger picture, actually comes out of this framework of seeing those beliefs as actions—believing, say, in rebirth or believing in the principle of karma, having conviction in these things. That’s a kind of action. What comes about as a result? You put the teachings into practice, you give of yourself by taking them on as working hypotheses. And only when you give yourself to them will you be able to judge whether they work or not. So remember this. The practice is an affair of giving. The Dhamma is an affair of doing. And the only way you know whether it’s true or not is if you really give yourself to the practice, if you really do the things the Buddha recommends and see what results you get. And if you’re true in giving yourself, then you can know that your test of the teachings will give you true results as well.

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