Doubting the Buddha

September 24, 2005

The Buddha said several times that all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering, or stress and the end of stress. But people tend not to believe him. They want him to teach other things as well. When you look at the history of Buddha’s thought, you see people taking his teachings and squeezing them to answer all kinds of questions that have very little to do with suffering or the end of suffering. This is what happened to the teaching on not-self. This is what happened to the teaching on emptiness, dependent-core arising. These are all very practical teachings that were meant to be used as part of a training to put an end to suffering. But over time, they got turned into something else. That’s why it takes so much time to sort out exactly what the Buddha did teach and what role these teachings had in that course of training. But we can’t blame just the people who came down before us or came between us and the Buddha. We have our own way of not really wanting to look at that issue. We have other issues. Everybody has other issues. We sit here meditating and all of a sudden something else seems a lot more interesting. We get totally involved in the little thought world. Instead of looking at it as an instance of suffering or something to analyze, we look at it as a way of putting an end to suffering. You get into the thought, and suddenly the issues in the thought become very real, very important. So it takes a real reorientation to get out of those thought worlds, simply to see them as processes. The mind’s habit of fabrication is a way of putting things together. You put feelings and perceptions together, you add a little salt and a little pepper, and then you want to eat them. And when they don’t agree with you, you find another one. This time you add mayonnaise and mustard, and it still doesn’t agree with you. You keep finding things to feed on. The Buddha says one of our foods for the mind is what he calls mental intention, intellectual intention, this habit we have of cooking up thoughts and then trying to feed on them, get some nourishment out of them. So we have to learn how to step back and look at them, not in terms of their content so much, but as instances of the process of fabrication. It’s a double process. On the one hand, we have to create a place for the mind to stay. We have to create other food for the mind so it’s not so hungry all the time. This is why we practice mindfulness, why we practice concentration, trying to give rise to a sense of rapture, a sense of refreshment, simply being with the breath. Rapture and refreshment are things that you put together. The causes are simply focusing on one object and evaluating it, looking at it again and again, getting more and more sensitive to how you relate to it, like taking the breath, trying to be very sensitive to how the breathing feels, figuring out which way of breathing feels right coming in, feels right going out, and then trying to maintain that. It’s the maintaining that’s going to let this very ordinary feeling of breath become more and more refreshing. Try to breathe in a way that doesn’t put a squeeze on the body, doesn’t force things. Think of the body as having lots of little nooks and crannies in its breath channels, so the breath can go all over the place, but it doesn’t have to exert pressure on anything or on any part of the body. This way, the mind and the body get a place to rest, and the sensations in the body get a chance to rest as well. You’re not running over them, pulling the breath in, pushing the breath out. When the sensations of the body are allowed to stay still, then they begin to expand in a sense of ease, giving rise to a sense of fullness. Be very gentle with that sense of fullness. Again, you can’t squeeze it or force it, because if you do, then you spoil it. Just allow it to spread, and then you can feed on it. Just allow it to be there. That in and of itself is nourishing. Then the other thoughts come in. You can just brush them aside. Try to stay with a sense of full ease, a sense of stillness. Let the mind soak in that for a while. That’s food for the mind. When you have this kind of food for the mind, you’re less and less hungry for other thoughts, other types of mental food. When you’re less hungry, then you can look at those thoughts for what they are, simply as processes. It’s like walking past an open-air movie theater. You look up at the screen, and you can look at it in one of two ways. You can either look at it in a way to see what the movie is about, who are the characters, what are they doing, and you do your best to get into the movie, even though you can’t hear what’s being said. It’s amazing how much the mind will invest in a movie even when you can’t hear the soundtrack. Or you can look at it simply as flashes of color on the screen. You don’t have to try to make sense out of it at all. The first way, you can actually start getting excited or sad or angry, or whatever the story is about, or whatever emotion the story is supposed to evoke. Or even if you don’t know the story, maybe you find yourself evoking emotion. The second way helps cut through that. You see it simply as patterns of color, which really don’t have to mean anything at all. It’s the same with the thoughts in the mind. You can either get involved in them, and even when they don’t mean that much, you can give them all kinds of meaning and invest all kinds of emotional weight in the thoughts. Or you can learn to see them simply as these flashes in the mind. They come flashing in, flashing out. We think we’re clever because we’ve learned how to find meaning in the flashes, but also we find a lot of suffering in the flashes. And if you’re not too eager to feed on them, then you can actually look at them as a process. You can take them apart. There are perceptions where you put labels on things. Then there are the feelings. Sometimes just a label in and of itself will evoke a particular feeling. Then you start building stories around the labels and around the feelings. And there can be no end to these things. One story may trail off, but then you replace it with another one and just keep on going. But it’s the same old raw material. It’s feelings, perceptions, thought constructs. And by their nature, these things don’t last very long. And yet we try to patch them together, build them into all kinds of things, put lots of mortar into them, hoping that they’ll stick together. And they don’t. Because the mortar itself is more perceptions, more thought constructs. But if you learn how to look at the process like this, it gives you a sense of disenchantment, dispassion. You wonder why you ever thought you could feed on these things. And because you have a better food source now, then you don’t feel so compelled to go picking up every scrap and chewing on it. So instead of getting involved with the agendas of a particular thought world, you can just see it as an instance of stress and develop your powers of concentration, mindfulness, and discernment as ways of putting an end to that stress. It can be disorienting, because we’ve put so much meaning and importance in our thoughts. But when you can learn to pull yourself out, then you can let go. Then you’re in control of the thinking process. It becomes a tool that you can use when you need it and something you can put aside when you don’t. So it’s good to be able to step out and look at your thoughts from that point of view, what the Buddha was teaching, just stress and the ending of stress. Then you find that it helps you to be able to dissolve away a lot of other things you might have thought were important. As the Buddha points out, one of the big issues is a sense of self that we create around our fabrication, what he calls “I-making” and “my-making.” If you look carefully, you can see even that sense of who you are as a construct, and that it involves an awful lot of tension, pain, stress, and discontent. And a lot of the other things that you hold dear. Again, if you really look at them, they’re just constructs, things you put together, instances of stress. When you can step back and look at them from the point of view of a mind that’s concentrated and has a sense of fullness, it really changes your relationship to these activities, these processes. You really can free yourself from them. You don’t have to be under their power. So it’s good to remember why we’re here, what this training is all about. It helps put everything else in perspective. Keep it focused on that one issue. Don’t get sidetracked into blind alleys. When you keep in mind the Buddha’s question or the topic of his teaching, and you apply that to your experience, you find that experience becomes a very different kind of thing. As the Buddha said, there is this possibility, the possibility of an end to suffering and an end to stress. We have a lot of trouble believing them. Sometimes it’s almost as if our imaginations just can’t get around the idea. But if you follow his teaching, follow his training, it can actually get you there. So allow that concept to get into your head. Give it some room in there and see what it does. It should rearrange everything.

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