Challenge of Right View, The

October 17, 2005

The right view is not just a statement about how things are. There’s an imperative built into it. The sutta we chanted just now, setting the wheel of Dharma in motion, points out those imperatives. In fact, the imperatives are part of the wheel. Back in ancient India, in the philosophical texts or the legal texts—well, it’s hard to call them a text because they were things that people memorized—when they’d set up sets of variables, they’d go through all the permutations, and they called that a wheel. There’s a wheel in the Buddha’s first sermon. It talks about the four noble truths, and each noble truth has three levels of knowledge associated with it. It goes through all the permutations. Three times four is twelve. That’s why the Dharma wheel over there on the wall has twelve spokes. The first level of knowledge is knowing the noble truth, in other words, knowing what suffering is, knowing what is the cause of suffering, knowing the cessation of suffering, knowing what the path to the end of cessation of suffering would be. The second level is knowing what duty is appropriate to each. In terms of suffering or stress, you have to comprehend it. In terms of the cause, you have to abandon it. In terms of cessation, you have to realize it or witness it. And as for the path, you have to develop it. Knowing that imperative is important. That’s the second level of knowledge. The third level is knowing that you’ve completed it. You’ve actually done it. You’ve done all the work that has to be done. You have totally comprehended suffering. You’ve totally abandoned the cause. You’ve totally realized the cessation of suffering, and you’ve fully developed the path. That’s the wheel of Dharma. Notice the content. Even just the first level of knowing what suffering is, knowing its cause, etc., there’s kind of an imperative built in there that suffering is something you want to put an end to. You just can’t let it stay there. Something’s got to be done. The Buddha once said that people’s normal reaction to suffering is twofold. On the one hand, you’re bewildered. Why is the suffering coming about? On the other hand, you search for someone else who may know something about how to put an end to the suffering. The bewilderment is caused by the fact that suffering is based on all kinds of factors which can interplay in some very complex ways. There’s no one formula that’s going to cure every form of suffering. That’s why the path has so many factors. The problem with this bewilderment and search is that when you get bewildered, you search in the wrong places and end up trying out all kinds of weird ideas and putting an end to suffering. But basically, there is that imperative that underlies the whole thing, which is, what can we do to put an end to suffering? In the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha is trying to take that bewilderment and take that tendency for a search and point it in the right direction and actually use it to your advantage. It’s interesting that this was the first issue he raised in his very first talk. It was the theme all the way out. He said that was the only thing he taught. All he taught was suffering and the end of suffering. If he just taught about suffering and left it there, that wouldn’t be much help. But he taught about it in such a way that he could also put an end to it. Because the cause of suffering is craving, where is craving? The craving is inside our own minds. It’s an unskillful way of dealing with suffering. And yet it creates more. So what that means is we have to learn to be more skillful, follow the other path, which is the path to the end of suffering. No one else can make us skillful. We have to develop the skill on our own. There’s one place where the Buddha says there are two sources for awakening. One is the voice of another person, advice you get from somebody else. And then there’s appropriate attention. That’s your internal factor. And even if you get advice from somebody else, it can’t make you skillful. You have to use your own ability to attend to things appropriately, which means basically asking the right questions, asking questions in terms of these Four Noble Truths. What, right now, is the suffering or stress that you’re feeling? And what’s the cause? And probably the cause for why the mind is suffering right now is something in the present moment. There are causes coming in from the past that may make you feel pain, either in the body or in the mind. But how you react to that is something you’re doing right now, and that’s important. It determines how we do the meditation. That’s one fact right here. The Jains, another contemplative order in the time of the Buddha, believed that all the pleasure and pain you’re experiencing now is the result of past actions. As a result, that meant the cause of suffering was something you did in the past. You can’t go back and undo it. So it’s inevitable that you’re going to have to suffer. Their only cure was that you just sit there and try to be very equanimous in the face of that pain so you don’t create any new karma. And then when there’s no new karma, the old suffering just kind of burns itself out. That’s the end. Now, the funny thing is that teaching is promoted as a Buddhist teaching nowadays, that you burn up the suffering simply by enduring it. But that’s based on a wrong understanding of where suffering comes from. It’s not just from the past. In fact, it is primarily from the present moment. The cause of suffering is something you’re doing right now. Not only are you doing it, you have a passion for it. That’s why you do it. So the path is aimed at putting an end to that passion, showing you that you’re striving at things that are actually hurting you. The end of passion comes from understanding. You don’t just sit there and watch. Some things you can just sit there and watch and then go away. But other things, it doesn’t work. You’ve got to understand them. As the Buddha says, you have to apply metal fabrication, or the process of fabrication, in order to undo these unskillful fabrications. The main fabrications in meditation are directed thought, evaluation, and perception. You direct your thoughts at a particular object, you evaluate it, and then you see what perception you can apply to it that’s going to be helpful. Like in concentration, all the stages of concentration up to the dimension of nothingness are all called perception attainments. Like when you’re focusing on the body right now, learn how to perceive the sensations in the body as breath sensations. How do they relate to one another in that sense? All the way down to the little physical sensations, see them all as breath. Before you look at their breath aspect, make that the perception you focus on. And as you apply the perception of breath, it will actually highlight the breathy side of every sensation in the body, if you apply it consistently enough, if you apply it thoroughly enough. That’s one way of applying perception. The other way is that once the mind is settled in, you can start applying what the commentaries call the three characteristics. I discovered recently that that term, the three characteristics, is found nowhere in the canon. The Buddha himself never used the term. When he talked about inconstancy, stress, not-self, anicca, dukkha, anatta, he called them perceptions. You apply the perception of inconstancy. You apply the perception of stress. You apply the perception of not-self, first to any of the distractions that would pull you away from concentration, and then ultimately to the state of concentration itself. And in applying those perceptions, you find you run into a lot of other perceptions that you’ve been holding on in your mind. The purpose of this path is to dig up those issues. In fact, where do you claim that this body here is yours, or those thoughts are yours? The only way to get around it is to see that they really are inconstant, and they’re really stressful, and they’re stressful and constant. Why would you want to hold on? Well, you find some advantage. We don’t hold on to things without some idea that they’re going to do us some good. Simply telling us that these things are empty is not going to overcome our attachment to them. Say that you’re attached to food. Someone tells you, “Okay, food is empty of any self-nature. Food is empty of any inherent existence.” Does that overcome your attachment to food? Well, you’re not attached to food because of its inherent existence. You’re attached to it because it tastes good and fills you up. Whether it has inherent existence or not is not the issue. But if you found out that the food that you’ve been eating and enjoying was poisonous, was actually harming your system, then you’d be more inclined to let go. And if you saw that it didn’t really fill you up at all, you’d be even more likely to let go. So the Buddha has you apply these perceptions of inconstancy, stress, not-self, to see where you run into other perceptions that you’ve been holding on to, consciously or unconsciously, of this is me, this is mine, this is permanent, this is something really worth holding on to. This is why it’s called exerting a fabrication. You really have to push, push, push those perceptions to see what they dig up in the mind. It’s like developing goodwill. When you spread thoughts of goodwill, it’s not that you’re spreading marshmallow cream over everything. If you really are serious about developing goodwill for all beings, you’re going to run into people that it’s hard to feel goodwill for. That’s the whole purpose of the practice, is to dig through those entrenched ideas. How can I feel goodwill for that person? They’ve done this. How can I feel goodwill for this person? They’ve done that. We have to keep reflecting, “What does it mean to feel goodwill?” It doesn’t mean you have to like them. All it means is you wish that they could find true happiness inside. If they could find true happiness inside, they wouldn’t keep on doing those horrible things. Reflecting this way helps change your attitude to a lot of people. It makes it easier to deal with people you don’t like. The same way you can reflect, “What do you gain out of ill will?” You don’t really get anything at all from the desire to see other people suffer. You begin to realize that whatever pleasure you got out of that type of thinking is really self-destructive. It helps you let go. So all these perceptions that the Buddha has us apply to things, to dig up unskillful attitudes, help us loosen our passion for the things in the present moment that are causing suffering. We’re not here trying to burn away our old karma by sitting and being very patient and with pain. We’re trying to figure out what is it right now that you’re attached to that’s causing suffering. When you see the connection between the suffering and the stress and the cause, then you can let go. So this understanding of karma, that what we’re experiencing right now in terms of pleasure and pain, is a combination of past actions and present actions, or past intentions and present intentions. It’s very important for understanding why we’re meditating the way we do. We use the process of fabrication—directed thought, evaluation, perception—to dig up the cause of stress and to learn how to develop dispassion for it. When there’s dispassion for it, you let go, and that’s the end of the suffering and stress. This is why this understanding of causality, this understanding of karma, is so important. It directs your attention at the right spot, right here, right now, to what’s going on in the mind. You’re trying to understand what’s going on in the mind, not just enduring, but understanding, seeing through your craving, seeing through your ignorance. So that’s the imperative. Stress is contained in the Noble Truths, the imperative that’s contained in Right View. Look at what you’re doing right now that’s causing stress, and if you understand it from the right perspective, then you can stop suffering. That’s the challenge that the Buddha sets out for all of us. It’s up for each of us to decide whether we’re up for that challenge or not.

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