The Duty to Understand

May 17, 2006

The first noble truth the Buddha defines suffering or stress, the Pali word is dukkha, he defines it as the five clinging aggregates. And the clinging is the important point there. The suffering that eats into the heart. is made up of those five things. Clinging to form, clinging to feelings, clinging to perceptions or mental labels, clinging to thought constructs, clinging to consciousness or cognizance. That clinging is something we have to comprehend. It’s important to keep in mind the duties that go with each of those noble truths, because all too often we’ve got our duties mixed up. We try to let go of the suffering. The Buddha says, “No, you try to comprehend the suffering.” So we try to comprehend the way there’s clinging all around these aggregates. That’s what the Buddha has you do instead of just letting go. He says, “Learn how to cling in skillful ways.” That’s what the path is. You take those aggregates and you hold on to them in a different way. Instead of clinging to them for the sake of sensual desire, clinging to them in terms of rituals, clinging to them in terms of unskillful views in and of themselves, or clinging to them as self, you learn how to hold on to them as a path. And in holding on to them as a path, you’re in a much better position to comprehend them, to comprehend both the aggregates and the clinging. And it works both ways. One is to look at the aggregates and to see whether they really are worth clinging to, and then look at the clinging itself, how that’s unskillful. So this is where the teachings on skillful and unskillful behavior come in. As I suggested, there is a skillful way of holding on to these things. For instance, as we’re meditating here right now, we are holding on to the body as our object, the form of the body here. We’re trying to breathe in ways that give rise to pleasant feelings. We’re holding on to the reception or the mental label of breath. We’re holding on to the thought constructs, the directed thought that focuses your attention on the breath, and the evaluation that looks at it to see where it might be improved or where it’s already good. And once it’s good, what can be done with that sense of pleasure? You can spread it around. And then we try to maintain our awareness of these things. So we’re still holding on, but we’re holding on in a different way. Because when you hold on to the aggregates in this way, you can look at them in and of themselves, and you see the clinging more clearly. The reason you can look at them is because it’s a lot more quiet than holding on to these things as yourself, say, or holding on to them out of sensual desire. This is one of the reasons that the Buddha has that chant in the thirty-two parts of the body. As you contemplate the thirty-two parts, go back in history. Actually, in the Canon, it’s thirty-one parts. The brain got added in the commentaries. I want you to look at the way you cling to the body, especially when you cling to it as something desirable. Some people object that this type of meditation teaches us a negative body image, and so many of us already have suffering from a negative body image. But the Buddha’s not saying that your particular body is uglier than anybody else’s. The parts that look so listed there are things we all have in common. And there’s no competition for Miss Liver of 2006, Miss Kidneys. We’re all equal. The purpose of this is to get us to stop and look at our own attachment. Because even if we don’t think we’re pretty enough or good-looking enough, still we’re awfully attached to the body. And a fair amount of that attachment is sensual. There’s a passage where the Buddha says, “You start out by being attracted to yourself, and then you go on to being attracted to other people.” So you’ve got to look at it. Learn how to look at the body in such a way that you can get out of that mode. You’ll find it easier to get into the mode of simply using the body as a vehicle for the practice. It becomes your object of meditation, simply for the purpose of concentration. They say the concentration isn’t fully mastered until the state of non-return, which is also the point where essential desire is abandoned, the fetter of sensual desire is cut. So this contemplation is very useful if you really want the mind to settle down. You’ll notice that things that obstruct you from settling down, one of the major things that obstructs you is your concern about the body. Is it going to get well-fed? Are the pains going to cause it to develop permanent problems? All these worries about the body can pull us out. So the Buddha has you look at the body in such a way that you’re less likely to get pulled out over issues of the body. That way, that particular form of clinging gets weakened. You’re still holding to the body as part of your practice of concentration. As we remember, precepts and practices are a type of clinging, but you’re holding to it as a tool. For the sake of awakening, all the forms of clinging can get transformed. You take on views, take on right views, because they are useful in understanding this problem of suffering. They help you comprehend. So as long as you need them, as long as you haven’t fully comprehended suffering, hold on to right views. Don’t think you go beyond views by being an agnostic or being a skeptic or being accepting of all views. Those things in themselves are views that you can cling to. Many times they get in the way of seeing how you’re causing suffering. If you cling to the idea that every path is good, there are a lot of bad paths out there. That old idea that all paths lead to the top of the mountain, they don’t. I don’t know of any mountain in the world where all the paths on the mountain lead to the top. Some of them lead you over a cliff. Some of them lead you back down to the bottom. The Buddha has you hold on to right views because they’re useful, they’re tools. Looking at the stress, trying to comprehend it, so that you can let go of the cause. In other words, once you’ve fully comprehended stress and fully let go of the cause, then you can let go of the right view. You don’t have to hold on to it anymore. It’s there to use whenever you need it again, to teach other people, to help other people. But in terms of holding on, you hold on only as you’re using it as a tool. The same with views about the self. That’s another type of clinging. You develop a right view. You develop self-esteem around the idea that you’re the sort of person who always tries to do the skillful thing, who feels shame over the idea of doing something unskillful, fears the consequences of doing things that are unskillful. That’s a useful self. That’s a useful way of developing self-esteem. It doesn’t depend on your always having done the right thing, but it means you’re always willing to admit your mistakes, learn from them, and try the best you can. That kind of self is a really helpful self to have on the path. As Ananda points out in one of the Discourses, even conceit, this idea of “I am,” plays a useful role on the path. You hear that other people have gained awakening. You say, “Well, they can do it. Why can’t I?” It’s all these forms of clinging. They can be transformed into the right way of holding to the path. It’s when you use them to hold to the path, on the one hand, that you let go of really unskillful forms of clinging. Finally, once they’re taken care of, then you can turn around and look at these clingings you have on the path. That’s when you let go totally. You can examine the nature of clinging by looking at how you hold on to the path in very subtle ways. You let go of the clinging because you comprehended it. You’ve been able to watch it in action. You can learn how to see that even skillful things ultimately have to be let go. There’s a passage where the Buddha said that prior to his awakening, one of the most important things that led to his awakening was his unwillingness to rest content with skillful qualities. He’s not even mentioning unskillful qualities. He wasn’t the sort of teacher that says, “Well, learn to accept your anger and to appreciate your anger or whatever. Be nice to your anger.” He says, “Try to understand it so you can go beyond it.” Develop skillful qualities, but once you’ve developed them, don’t rest content. You’ve got a nice, luminous state of mind. The Buddha says, “Don’t be content with that.” The Jhammabhava makes the point that the luminous mind is ignorance. If you simply accept it as your goal, well, there you are. You’re stuck. You can’t rest content even with that. But this doesn’t mean that you drop things right away as you develop them. You work at developing them. You hold on to them. So they can do their duty as the path, and then you can watch them to see what subtle forms of clinging are like. Once you comprehend those, then you can let go. Ultimately, you see that even the path has to be fabricated, and because it’s fabricated, you can’t totally trust it in and of itself. You can take it as a tool, but there comes a point where you have to let it go. You’re craving for the path and it turns into dispassion. With dispassion, there’s release from all kinds of clinging, skillful and unskillful. Remember this point. Clinging is there to be understood, and you’re going to understand it by turning it into the way you hold on to the path. Do the work of the path and then watch it as it’s working. And that becomes the way you complete your duties in terms of all four noble truths. So as you’re working here, remember that there are skills to be mastered. There are things to be held on to. Don’t think that you’re clever and say, “Well, I’ve done a little concentration. I know what it’s like. I can let go of it now.” If it hasn’t done its work, you’ve got to hold on to it. And even when it has done its work, you’ll find that it’s useful from time to time. As the Buddha, he would still practice concentration after his awakening. He still followed all the practices of the path, both because they were pleasant abiding and because they were useful in his teaching career. So learning to hold on to the path is one of the important skills that we have to work on, both so that the path can do its work and so that ultimately we can understand clinging and let it go. Once the stress and suffering of that first noble truth is done with, then the stress of the aggregates, the inherent part of the stress of the aggregates, doesn’t weigh on the mind anymore, because you’re not dragging it in to burden the mind. In other words, the stress that remains doesn’t matter, for the stress that weighed down the heart is gone. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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