Gaining the Dhamma Eye

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The Buddha once divided the world into two types of beings, those that are certain and those that are uncertain. Certain in the sense that their future course is secure. They’re sure to reach nirvana, and whatever rebirths they have are going to be no lower than the human. These are the people who’ve seen the Deathless, what they call “gaining the Dharma eye.” Everyone else, the Buddha said, is uncertain. And being uncertain like this is not a good place to be. So our practice should be aimed at becoming certain in this way, gaining the Dharma eye, seeing the Deathless. The purpose of the Four Noble Truths is to focus us in that direction, to get us there. But it’s more than just knowing the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha said there are actually four qualities that help get you to that first taste of awakening. The first is associating with good people, admirable people, because the people of Buddha we associate with really do have an impact on our lives. The Buddha once said that it’s like being a wrapper, either to an old rotten fish or to a very fragrant wood. If the leaf gets wrapped around the rotten fish, the leaf begins to smell bad as well. If it’s wrapped around fragrant wood, like aloeswood or sandalwood, the leaf becomes fragrant too. We pick up habits from the people we associate with. This is why it’s important to find somebody that you really trust, someone whose behavior is inspiring, and someone you can trust, that they wouldn’t claim to know anything on the basis of greed, aversion, or delusion. And someone who can show you the path, because they suggest to you what’s possible in the human life. This is why the Buddha once said that without him as our admirable friend, we’d pretty much be lost, because he was the person who showed what a human being can do to gain the Dharma eye and go beyond the Dharma eye to full awakening, complete the end of suffering. We’re here about to do this, and it sounds inspiring. When you attain the Dharma eye, you see that it’s actually true. Even with our human efforts, even with our human imperfections, we can learn how to overcome those imperfections. At least to the extent that we can see our minds in action, see where they’re causing stress and suffering, and learn to stop whatever actions are causing stress and suffering. In the course of doing that, gain the Dharma eye. That’s the first requisite, associating with people who let you know that this is possible, that it’s not just hearsay or a myth or a nice archetype that can’t really be lived up to. It’s something that really can be lived, it can be discovered, and it really helps to hang around people who have seen that, because it gives you a new idea of what you can do with your own life. That’s the first requisite. The next requisite is listening to the Dharma from that person. The Buddha gives examples on how you can know what’s Dharma. If it leads to dispassion, if it leads to being easy to look after, if it leads to being disentangled, if it leads to freeing yourself from the fetters of the mind. In other words, you know the Dharma by the kind of behavior that it’s going to inspire in you. If you put this into practice, these are the kinds of results you should expect. That’s how you recognize the Dharma. Once you’ve listened to it, then the Buddha says you apply appropriate attention. That’s the third quality. In other words, you look at the Dharma you’ve listened to and you actually put it into practice and see exactly where you’re still causing stress and suffering and where you’re not. This is where the teachings on the Four Noble Truths come in. These are the categories that you learn to look at your experience in. Basically, what it comes down to is cause and effect. It’s important to have an appropriate understanding of cause and effect. The Buddha teaches that cause and effect are not deterministic. Every moment, he says, is composed of results of past actions, past intentions, your current actions or intentions, and then the results of your current actions and intentions. Some things are shaped by the past. You can’t go back and change your past actions, but they don’t determine everything. There’s also this element of present intention, and there’s a possibility of freedom right there. We do have choices. While we’re sitting here meditating, you begin to see in your own breath. You can choose what way to breathe. Now, you may not be taking full advantage of that freedom, but the freedom is there. A lot of the meditation is learning how to take more and more advantage of this freedom, even on this very basic level. You can choose to have long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, deep, shallow—all kinds of breathing. Learn to look at your breathing as a process of either skillful or unskillful cause, and then look at the effect, which is the feelings that arise as a result of the way you breathe. This is an immediate lesson in the Four Noble Truths, in the categories of appropriate attention. From there, you can apply the same lesson to other aspects of your life, like your sense of who you are. Many times we feel we’re stuck with certain personality traits, certain habits. This is just inherent in what we are as people. But the Buddha says, “Never try to define yourself as to what you are. Just look at the sense of self and realize that it, too, is an activity.” You keep creating your sense of self over and over and over again, and you do it in different ways. The self you create around feelings of physical hunger is very different from the self you create around the desire to sit here and meditate. If you look at this sense of self over time, you’ll see how often it changes. It’s like the reflections of light on water, slipping all around, all over the place. We’re very slithery. And fast. Because they’re activities, you can learn how to do them more skillfully. Again, you’re applying appropriate attention to the way you create a sense of self. Look at the way you create a self around this, that, and the other thing, and notice what happens as a result. To what extent does that particular sense of self cause suffering and stress, and to what extent does it alleviate suffering and stress? Once you see it as an activity, then you realize you can change. If you’re stuck with yourself as a thing that is already defined, you’re really up the creek. Because how is your self going to change itself? It’s got to be stuck with the way it is. Some people actually use this argument to say that it’s impossible for anyone to overcome their own defilements. They have to hope for help from outside. Because the self is so inherently corrupt that it can’t purify itself. But that’s looking at the self as a unitary thing. Again, the Buddha never says to say that. He says, “Look at your sense of self as an activity.” You can always change your actions. From the point of view of one sense of self, you can look at your other self-activities and see which ones are skillful or not. After all, all your senses of self are based on the desire for pleasure, based on the desire to overcome pain. This is how we mature. This is how we gain experience in the world, is seeing which of our actions are really effective in giving rise to pleasure and which ones are not. Because we have all these multiple selves, they can be used to train one another, to observe one another, get more and more sensitive. So this is applying appropriate attention to this whole issue of self in such a way that makes you realize that you can change. There are skillful ways of selfing and unskillful ways. You learn how to be more and more skillful, applying the Four Noble Truths to the activity of selfing. You realize that there are some areas that you can change in terms of what you’re intending to do right now. As for the raw materials you’ve got, well, many times those come from past actions. You can’t change that, but there’s always the opportunity to do the most skillful thing with the raw materials you’ve got. You look at all the people in the past who’ve been able to come from really bad backgrounds or backgrounds with a lot of negative karma. Angulimala is the primary example. But you’ve also got lots of examples in the Theragatha and the Therigatha, people whose meditation was miserable for years and years and years. They thought they just didn’t have it in them. A couple of people actually contemplated suicide. But then they gained insight into it. They knew exactly how they were causing suffering and how they didn’t have to. So no matter how bad their past karma was, they were able to attain awakening. Because of that potential freedom in the present moment, the freedom to do whatever is skillful right now, regardless of what the raw material of your past karma gives you, that’s a freedom we always have. So appropriate attention focuses you on that potential for freedom. It teaches you to make the most of it. The fourth quality is practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. This means several things. On the one hand, you don’t practice in line with your preferences. You see what the Dhamma requires, and you do it. All too often, we practice the Dhamma in accordance with our preferences, and it’s great. All it does is keep us stuck in our own ways. If you really want to see something new in life, you have to turn that around. You have to adjust your preferences to fit in with the Dhamma. When the Buddha recommends virtue, okay, we try virtue. We fit all of our actions and all of our attitudes in line with what requirements come from virtue. Precepts are promises we make to ourselves, and they’re universal promises. In other words, under no circumstances will we kill. Under no circumstances will we steal down through the main precepts. In whichever areas you find that the precepts are difficult, you learn to work with that. See how you can change your habits so you can maintain that promise to yourself. As the Buddha said, when you make that promise to yourself, you’re providing universal peace, safety, and security for the whole world. And then you have a taste of that universal security as well. In other words, under no circumstances will you kill. The result of that is you’re not creating the circumstances by which anybody would come back and kill you. As for past karma, in which you may have killed people, animals, whatever, in the past, you deal with that in terms of developing good qualities of mind right now. As the Buddha said, if you develop immeasurable goodwill, compassion, appreciation, and equanimity, the results of past bad karma are going to be minimized, because of the abundant, enlarged quality of your mind. So at this point, you’re creating the circumstances that the Dharma requires. Practicing the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma, you say, “Okay, I’m going to put my preferences aside and just really shape my life, really shape my actions in line with what the Buddha taught.” After all, his teachings were teachings that came from his awakening. They didn’t come from his just sitting around and thinking about what would be nice. He’d seen in his own practice what worked and what didn’t work. He taught everything in a very straightforward manner. So we owe it to ourselves to give it a try. It’s the same with the practice of concentration and the practice of discernment. We try to bring our minds in line with the instructions and see what happens. In other words, really put the Buddha’s teachings to the test. That’s one meaning of practicing the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma. The other meaning is that you practice for the sake of disenchantment, dispassion. In other words, you keep your mind focused on that goal that you’re going to try to get beyond all of your attachments to your emotions, all of your attachments to everything that colors the mind. That obscures the mind. You’re going to focus on the purity of your own mind as your main goal, because that’s ultimately what dispassion means. You’re not going to let your mind get clouded by its old desires and its old fears and its old aversions. You try to develop a state of mind in which the mind can be in the world, but it’s not colored by the world. It can maintain its purity no matter what its surroundings. You put all the things that the mind likes to feed on, and you learn to train it so that it’s strong enough through virtue, concentration, and discernment so that it doesn’t have to feed on those things anymore. You lift your mind. That’s what the heightened mind means. You lift your mind above your old likes and dislikes, the things that it used to feed on. You get to the point where you realize you don’t want to feed on those anymore. You’ve become disenchanted with them. From disenchantment comes dispassion, and from dispassion comes release. These are the four qualities we should keep in mind as we’re practicing. These are the things that lead to our experience of the Deathless, the point where we can make our actions more and more refined. Through virtue, concentration, discernment, learn to see the results of your actions where they’re causing stress, where you can act in ways that are more skillful, that cause less stress. As you cause less stress, your sensitivity gets more and more refined, and so you keep working at this until you finally get to the point where the mind has no more need for intention. It doesn’t even have to feed off intentions anymore. Just drop the whole aspect of activity. In other words, you’re so free that you don’t even have to intend. That’s where applying appropriate attention to your actions can lead to an opening of the mind. Let’s stay at the point of the practice that’s called non-fashioning. That’s when you realize what you’re doing. That’s what the Buddha taught really was true. There is a Deathless, and it can be found through your own efforts. Notice that these four qualities, nothing in here says that you have to be ordained, you have to be a monk or a nun. It’s the quality of your intention, the extent to which you devote yourself to the practice, that’s what makes a difference. As Ajahn Mun used to say, the most important thing in the practice is to have that determination. You’re not going to come back and create suffering again. You hold on to that, no matter what happens, until you finally get to that point where you’ve achieved the goal. That’s when you can let go. In the meantime, this is something you want to hold on to. But it’s that determination that will see you through. That has nothing to do with the externals of being a layperson or being a monk or whatever. It comes from having seen that you’ve suffered enough and you realize that the cause is not outside, it’s inside. When the Buddha offers the potential, it is possible to train yourself so that you don’t have to suffer anymore. You go for it, and you do whatever needs to be done. You make whatever sacrifices are required to practice. You practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma so that you actually do see the Dhamma. If you practice the Dhamma in accordance with your preferences, that’s what you end up seeing as your preferences. The results of your preferences, many times, are things that you really shouldn’t prefer or you really don’t want to prefer, because it leads to suffering. But if you practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, that’s when you get the Dhamma “I.” So see if you can prove that what the Buddha said was true. Regardless of your past karma, past actions, there is this element of freedom in the present moment, the freedom to choose the skillful thing to do. As you explore that freedom, it leads to an even greater freedom when you become totally free from all suffering. In fact, we have the Buddha as our friend. That’s the first element. The question for us now is, are we going to associate with the Buddha, listen to his Dhamma, apply appropriate attention to our lives, and practice in accordance with his Dhamma? That’s the choice we have to make.

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