Testing Karma

September 6, 2006

One of the distinctive features of the Buddha’s teachings is that there’s something that we can all put to the test. He doesn’t ask us to believe in things that we have no way of knowing. There are some things we may not be sure of yet. In a few cases, he asks you to take things on faith, but you take them on faith so that you can test them. For instance, the teachings on karma. He never gives an airtight proof that what he teaches about karma is correct, but the things that he teaches are things that you would really like to believe, that you really do have choices, your actions do make a difference. You can act in such a way that you can put an end to suffering. When you first hear these things, you can’t prove them, at least not in an empirical way. The Buddha offers a pragmatic test to begin with. Just think, if you believe that you have choices, what will that do to your life? If you believe that you had no choice in life, that if you had no free will, how would you live? If you had no free will, you’d just live in any old way at all. There’d be no incentive to make the effort to stick with a path. There’d be no incentive to make any effort at all. So, on the pragmatic level, it makes sense to take as a working hypothesis that you do have choices, your choices do make a difference, and you put them to the test to see how far that difference would go. When the Buddha says it can lead all the way to the ultimate happiness, true happiness, totally unconditioned, it’s a difficult thing to do. It’s a good thing to believe. It helps keep you from getting waylaid by lesser forms of happiness. But whether that’s true or not, you’ve got to put it to the test. So that’s what we’re doing here right now. We’re putting the Buddhist teachings to the test. Always try to be clear about what you know and what you don’t know yet, because one of the biggest obstacles to learning anything is to assume that you know something when it’s only an assumption. So we assume the teachings on karma. We assume the principle that we do have choice, that all of what we’re doing is worthwhile. And then we put those assumptions to the test. The Buddha was an amazing teacher. He never tried to intimidate anyone into believing what he taught. He wasn’t a demagogue. He wasn’t playing a power trip with other people. He had found something that really worked, and then he offered it. He said, “Look, give this a try.” And that was it. So the teachings are there for us to try, to sample. See what works, see what doesn’t work. All of the teachings have to be put to the test. The Buddha says that mindfulness and alertness are really helpful. Let’s see how helpful they are. Let’s develop mindfulness. Let’s develop some alertness. Discernment, he says, is a good thing. Good in what way? What leads to true happiness? That’s always the main context of the entire teachings, the assumption that we all want happiness and the assumption that it’s basically a good thing, this desire for happiness. Where it goes astray is that we have all sorts of wrong ideas, one about what true happiness would be and two about how to get true happiness. So the Buddha doesn’t ask you to stop. He doesn’t ask you to stop desiring happiness. He simply says, “Try this different way or these different ways of looking for happiness, and your conception of happiness is going to change.” Wisdom begins with this question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” Right there in that question you have the seed for the big issues of discernment. The test for happiness is, one, that it’s long-term, so anything that’s inconstant or impermanent will not qualify. Two, it really does have to be happy, so anything that’s stressful doesn’t qualify. Three, it has to be something you can trust, so anything that you can’t control doesn’t qualify either. And how do you test those things? Well, you push their limits. Like when we practice concentration, as I said this morning, you’re pushing the envelope on those three characteristics. You’re trying to develop a state of mind that lasts. You stitch it together with mindfulness, remembering to stay with one object again and again and again, because the mind can so easily forget. It can slip off to other things. So you have to keep reminding it, “Stay right here. Stay with the breath.” See how long you can do that. Push the envelope on inconstancy. Try to be as steadily with the breath as you can. Now, to be steadily with the breath also means to try to make it pleasant, because if it’s unpleasant, you’re not going to stay here. Find what way of breathing feels good right now, what kind of breathing the mind can really relate to in a continuous way. Try not to force the breath too much. Remember, breath energy is something that flows very freely through the body. It may get stuck here and there, but as you’re trying to squeeze it here and squeeze it there and force it and hold the breath and whatever, that just creates more problems. That’s actually playing more with the liquid and solid elements in the body. Breath is more mercurial. It’s constantly flowing, constantly moving, so don’t try to bottle it up. You’ll find that as you give the breath more freedom, you do change the level of pleasure and ease in the body. That’s one of the three characteristics. Then, finally, you’re learning to control things more in an intelligent way. You’re not becoming a control freak where you force an impossible idea on things. People who really have control are the ones who master the principle of cause and effect and see how you can effectively have an impact on events in a way that doesn’t require that you’re constantly straddling and pressed out over them. So to what extent can you control the mind? Can you control your choices? Can you control your intentions? We’re pushing the envelope on the third of the three characteristics here. Ultimately, you find the point where they push back, but you don’t know them for sure until you’ve pushed them as far as you can. So again, this is another teaching that the Buddha has you test. It’s almost as if he says, “Prove me wrong.” We’re here to explore. We’re not here to clone enlightenment. We’re here to test the principle of cause and effect. Do our choices really have an impact? Do they have an impact for the good? Will I do it? Will it lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? Do my actions have the ability to lead to long-term welfare and happiness? Exactly how good is that welfare and happiness? How far did those concepts go? We’re here to test them. As the Buddha once said, if you don’t try to aim for this kind of happiness, the happiness that doesn’t age, grow ill, and die, then your life is not noble. Noble is one of those words that tends to disappear from modern vocabulary, like dignity, nobility. It’s because as a society we’re taught to keep our standards low. One of the reasons why we bow down to the Buddha is that he reminds us that we shouldn’t keep our standards low. We should have respect for this desire for long-term happiness, true happiness, one that’s so long-term that it actually goes beyond time. He says there is that possibility. And if you don’t rise to the challenge of that possibility, your life can’t be called noble. So put the possibility of nobility to the test and see how far it can take you. (crickets chirping)

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