A Slave to Craving

July 27, 2007

The passage we chanted just now about the world being swept away comes from a discourse in which a king is planning to go to his pleasure park. He learns that there’s a young monk meditating in the park. The monk had come from a wealthy family in that city, and the king had known him from before he was ordained. So he decided to go and ask the young monk why he ordained. He came from a wealthy family. He said, “Most people ordain because they’ve lost their relatives, they’ve lost their wealth, lost their health.” He said, “None of that applies to you. Why would you ordain?” And the monk answers with that set of passages we chanted. It starts out, “The world is swept away. It does not endure. The king says,”What does that mean?” It’s one of the things I like about the Pali canon. The kings come off kind of dumb. They’ve got all the power and pleasure you could imagine, and most of them are kind of dumb. And the young monk says, “Yes, the king, back when you were young, were you strong?” And the king says, “Oh, yes. In fact, I was so strong sometimes that I thought I had the strength of two men.” And the monk says, “How about now?” And the king says, “Oh no, I’m eighty years old now. Sometimes I think to put my foot in one place and I put it someplace else.” That’s what’s meant by the world is swept away. It’s inconstant. You can’t depend on it to stay the same way. Your strength gets swept away. Your mind sometimes gets swept away. That leads to the next one. The world offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. There’s no guarantee that we couldn’t have a virus suddenly infecting us, wiping us out. I read recently about a comet that had exploded over Ontario 12,000 years ago, wiped out the people, the mastodons, the saber-toothed tigers. It could happen. Earthquakes, fires, disasters, they happen very easily in this world. There’s no real protection from them. In the case of the king, he asked the monk, “What do you mean the world is no one in charge? After all, you’re talking to a king here.” And the monk said, “Do you have a recurring illness?” And the king said, “Yes, I have these recurring pains in my body. Sometimes I get so bad I’m lying there in pain and everyone standing around thinks I’m going to die.” And the young monk said, “Now, being king, can you order it so that the different people standing around can share out your pain so you don’t have to feel so much of the pain?” And the king said, “Oh, no, I have to feel all the pain myself.” That’s the truth of suffering, of stress. Then it moves on. The world has nothing of its own. The master will pass on, leaving everything behind. Again, the monk asked the king, “Are you wealthy? Do you have wealth?” And the king said, “Of course I do. The storeroom is filled with wealth.” And the monk said, “Can you take that with you when you go?” And the king said, “Of course not.” That’s the teaching on not-self, that these things that we claim to be ours are not really ours. It’s like the things we’ve borrowed for a while, and then we have to give them back. And if we don’t give them back nicely, they get wrenched from our grasp. And then finally, the fourth reflection. The world is insatiable, a slave to craving. The monk asked the king, “Do you now rule over this prosperous country?” And the king said, “Yes.” “What is so hard to come from the East and say, ‘There’s another prosperous country over there, lots of wealth, and with your army, you could conquer that kingdom’?” The monk asked, “What would you do?” And the king said, “Oh, I’d conquer the kingdom.” And suppose someone were to come from the West and say, “There’s another country to the West, another one to the North, another one to the South.” The king said, “I’d take those two.” Suppose there was someone to come from the other side of the ocean. “I’d take that country too.” It’s unending. In another passage, the Buddha said, “Even if it were to rain gold coins, it wouldn’t be enough for our desires.” We’ve seen this many times over. Someone becomes a millionaire, and you’d think they’d be happy. They’ve got all that money, enough to satisfy their desires. Well, once you get one million, you want two. When you get two, you want five. When you get five, you want ten. It just keeps going and going and going. So the question is, what are you going to do? Where are you going to find happiness in the midst of all this? The key there is, in that line, a slave to craving. As long as you’re craving happiness and things that can’t provide it, you’re going to suffer. And you look at the world. If everyone in the whole world lived like Americans do, it would be the end of the world. We’d burn up all the oil, pollute all the atmosphere, and make it totally unlivable. So looking outside for happiness, the mind is insatiable and the world is insufficient. But there is this other dimension, the dimension inside. And that’s what we focus on as we meditate. Because not only is the world insufficient, but look at the way we find our happiness. It depends on the suffering of other beings. This is what those reflections on the requisites are for. The food we eat, the clothing we wear, the shelter we live in, the medicine we use, we gain it through the suffering. Sometimes our own suffering, but a lot of times the suffering of other beings. Even if you’re vegetarians. I think all the farmers have to work so hard to get that food produced, especially now in these huge factory farms. Workers from other countries come in working at slave wages. And then the people have to transport it and all the stuff that goes to getting the food from the ground into your stomach. There’s a huge karmic debt there. And how about the sweatshops that make our clothes, the work that goes into building shelter, the way medicines get tested. I mean, there’s just a lot of suffering involved just in keeping this body alive. So not only is there not enough out there, but the stuff that we do depend on for our happiness out there, the more you think about it, the more miserable the whole situation is. We all live by feeding off each other. So is there happiness that doesn’t have to feed? That’s what we’re looking for as we look inside. One of the purposes of those passages on the requisites is to gain a sense of contentment, realizing, “Okay, just take enough to keep the body going, keep your body protected from the elements, and just enough medicine to keep the body healthy.” So that you can practice, so that you can really look inside the mind and see what potential you have there. That’s an area where the Buddha doesn’t recommend contentment. He says you try to develop as much virtue, as much concentration, as much discernment as possible. In other words, this is one area where effort is really worth it, where the effort does pay off. In the outside world, you can spend whole lifetimes working, working, working, and then just seeing the results of the work slipping through your fingers. But inside, the results of the effort stay with you, especially if you take the practice of virtue, concentration, and discernment to its total end. The passage the preceptor teaches the young monk, he says that virtue, when the mind is focused on concentration, when fostered by virtue or infused with virtue, is of great fruit, great benefit. Concentration really does lead to a sense of well-being. You focus here on the breath. You become acquainted with the breath to the point where you realize that you can breathe in all kinds of ways, and in some ways that are really gratifying, physically and mentally. It feels good to breathe in, it feels good to breathe out. The more intense the pleasure that comes from this, the more the mind is willing to settle down and just focus totally on the process of breathing in the body. Then you think of all the other pleasures that you could be indulging in at the time, and you realize that this is much better. It’s a harmless pleasure, for one thing, and you can tap into it whenever you want. Discernment, fostered with concentration, is of great fruit, great benefit. We can really see into the areas where craving has you enslaved, and you realize you don’t have to be enslaved. You realize a lot of it is based on ignorance and delusion. When you see clearly, you don’t fall for the things that you used to fall for, the things that you worked so hard to develop, and then saw them being washed away. You realize it’s just not worth the effort. You can’t compare with the results that come from learning how to develop the mind in concentration and discernment. You see through your attachments, through your misguided ideas, that you can base true happiness on things that are inconstant, stressful, and not self. All of its fermentation, in other words, all the things that come bubbling up out of the mind that make us go flowing out and looking for happiness outside. When discernment is fully developed, it frees the mind. You’re no longer a slave to craving. There’s a dimension that can be touched at the mind that’s not dependent on any kind of condition at all, any kind of effort at all, any kind of feeding at all. It’s available if you work at training the mind in virtue, concentration, and discernment. Or as the texts say, “Heightened virtue, heightened concentration, heightened discernment.” These are very ordinary sorts of things. Virtue is basically refraining from doing harm, and it’s something we do off and on throughout the day. Concentration is staying focused on one thing. There are many levels of concentration. There’s a level of concentration where you can focus on reading something or listening to something, working through a problem. It’s called momentary concentration because it stays with things for a certain period of time, and then it drops it. But again, concentration is something we already have. Discernment as well. There are a lot of ways in which we see that there are inefficient or harmful or stressful ways of doing things, and there are other easier and more efficient ways of doing them, and we go for the easier and more efficient way, the less harmful way. That kind of discernment we also have. But what you want to do is take these three qualities and take them to a heightened level. In other words, make your virtue all around so you’re not harmful at all, no intentional harm. Take concentration so you can stay focused on one thing. Even when there’s pain, even when there’s distraction, you can stay with that one thing. Stick with it all the way through. All the other things aren’t happening. Concentration becomes all around. When discernment becomes all around, you find a way in which you don’t have to cause any stress or suffering at all. That’s when you take these qualities and take them to a heightened level. That’s when they show their stuff, what they’re capable of. That there is a deathless happiness. It can be touched at the mind and it can be attained through human effort. That’s the kind of effort that’s well-spent. It’s not just running after its cravings. It’s something that really does reach an end. That’s why we focus inside, because the possibilities inside are much greater than the possibilities outside. You’re totally free from harm, free from disappointment. That’s what the Buddha says. That’s what his noble disciples all say. It’s up to us to see if we can prove it for ourselves, whether what they say is true or not. You have to be true, too, in following the path if you want to test its truth. So we’ve got this hour. Try to really be true to your meditation object and see what the result of truth is. Because the truth we’re talking about here is not just a truth of propositions or ideas. That is, whether they correspond to something else. The truth is the truth of really giving yourself to a practice, being truly sincere in doing it, truly focused in doing it. That’s the kind of truth that’s called for. And that’s the kind of truth that leads to something really special.

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