The Dhamma Eye

July 29, 2007

Okay, let’s sit and meditate. Focus on your breath. Know when the breath is coming in, know when it’s going out. And notice if it’s comfortable. If it’s not comfortable, you can change. If it feels too long or too short or too heavy or too light, you can change it so it feels better, feels good coming in, feels good going out. Focus on the breath so you can anchor the mind in the present moment. Because if you want to understand your own mind, you have to watch it in the present moment. If you try to watch it in the past or watch in the future, what are you going to watch? You watch your memories, you watch your anticipations. You don’t actually see it in action because your memories might be false, your anticipations. Who knows what’s going to happen in the future? All we can do is guess. So you have to be able to watch your mind in the present moment. And the first step in learning how to watch it is to get it anchored here. When you’re with the breath, you know you’re in the present. There’s no past breath you can watch, no future breath you can watch. But you can watch the breath right now. And as you learn how to watch the breath more and more steadily, it gets easier and easier to watch your own mind, to see what’s going on there. Because what do we have here? There’s a lot of activity in the mind, many layers of activity. But when you watch it consistently enough, you begin to peel it away, layer by layer by layer, until finally you get to something that’s really special. That’s what the Buddhist story is all about. As he said, when he was a young man, he looked around him at all the pleasures he had, and he realized that those were the kinds of pleasures that eventually would grow old, get ill, pass away. The people he loved, even the things he liked, they would grow old in their way, get decrepit, and then finally you’d have to throw them away. And even if they didn’t get thrown away before you died, eventually you would end up dying. Is there a happiness that’s deathless, that doesn’t die, that’s not affected by the death of the body? In other words, something that doesn’t change at all. And he realized that by staying at home he wouldn’t have time or the opportunity to really look deeply enough into the mind to see this, and so he went out, left home, went out into the wilderness. First he practiced with a couple of teachers who said they taught the deathless, and he wasn’t satisfied with their teaching. Then he tried six years of austerities, depriving himself of food, even stopping his breath to see if the pain that came from that would show the mind something special. There was the idea in the past that pleasure was bad, therefore pain must be good for you. He tried that for six years and realized that the pain wasn’t good for him either. It didn’t help. That was when he remembered, when he was a child. There was one time when he was sitting under a tree while his father was plowing, and his mind just naturally entered a state of solid and very pleasurable concentration. It felt good just to be sitting there very quiet, very still. He thought to himself, “Could this be the way to true happiness?” And he realized it could be, but he’d been starving himself so much he didn’t have the strength even to get his mind still that way. So he went back to eating food. There was a group of younger monks called the Five Brethren. They’d been staying with him, hoping that if he had starved himself to the point where he found something really special, they’d be the first to know. When they saw him eating again, they got disgusted with him and left. So now the Buddha was all on his own. He ate enough food until finally he had enough strength to get the mind in a good, solid concentration. So he sat under the Bodhi tree on the night of Visakha, which is the full moon in May. He resolved that he wouldn’t get up until he’d found a Deathless. And then toward morning, as he realized that the real problem in the mind wasn’t things outside. It was the mind’s own misunderstanding of what’s going on inside, and particularly not understanding why there’s suffering, what the mind does to create suffering, and to see if there’s a way to practice that puts an end to it. These were what he called the Four Noble Truths—suffering, its cause, the cessation of suffering, and the path to its end. So when he clearly saw those Noble Truths, and he saw further than that, each truth had a duty. When you experience suffering, the duty was to try to comprehend it, to understand it, to figure out why it was there. Then when you ran across the cause, your duty was to let it go. You saw that the cause was craving and ignorance. So those were the things you had to let go. As for the cessation of suffering, that’s something to realize, and the path to its cessation is something you develop. All these activities are skills. It takes time. In the Buddha’s case, he did it very quickly in one night, but for most of us it takes time to develop these skills, to learn how to comprehend our suffering, let go of its cause, realize its cessation, and develop the path to its cessation. But ultimately, he finally reached the point where he had fully realized the cessation of suffering, from having fully comprehended suffering and totally let go of its cause, and fully developed the path. That was when he found the deathless inside. In other words, his mind stopped creating suffering. When the suffering could fall away, what was left was something that didn’t die. The story goes that for the next seven weeks he just sat there under the tree, experiencing the bliss of release. Another version of the story is that he would get up each week and go sit someplace else nearby. So all in all, he sat in that area for seven weeks, which by our calendar would have ended last week. Then the question came into his mind that he had discovered this very subtle teaching. Should he teach it? His first thought was that it’s awfully subtle. He wondered if there’d be anybody who would understand. He almost gave up the desire to teach. That’s when one of the Brahmas, a deva way up in the highest level of heaven, realized that this would be disastrous. The Buddha went to all that trouble to gain awakening, and yet he didn’t teach the deathless, and nobody would know. So the Brahma went down and invited him to teach. He said, “There are some people with a little dust in their eyes. They’ll understand.” So the Buddha, now with special powers of knowing, surveyed the world, and he realized that that was the case. There would be people who would understand, so he resolved to teach. The first people he thought of were his two teachers that he’d studied with way back when he first went into the wilderness. Then he realized that both of them had recently died. Then next he thought about the five young monks who had stayed with him when he was practicing austerities, and he realized that they were often Banaras. Banaras was a good long walk away, so he spent the next week walking. In our calendar, that would have gotten from last Sunday up to this Sunday. This Sunday he arrived just outside of Banaras. He found them, and at first they weren’t willing to listen to him. They said, “Well, you’ve been eating food. What could you understand? After all those years of austerities, you didn’t reach the deathless. How could you reach the deathless after you eat food?” He said, “Well, it didn’t have anything to do with eating food or not eating food. I found the deathless. I’ll teach it to you.” Again, they refused to listen to him, and he finally said, “Look, have I ever made a statement that proved to be untrue?” They reflected on him, and they realized he was a very truthful sort of person, so they were willing to listen. That’s when he taught them what they call the Wheel of Dharma. He was explaining that austerities was not the path, and sensual indulgence was not the path. What was the path? It was his path of starting with understanding the truth about suffering, its cause, and its cessation, and the path to its cessation. The reason it’s called a wheel is because each of those truths has a duty, and then there’s a stage of having completed the duty. So you have three stages altogether. One is understanding what the truth is. Two, realizing it has a duty. And then three, realizing that you’ve finished, completed the duty. So you have four truths, three levels of knowing. Back in those days when they would list different variables like this against each other, they called it a wheel. So that’s why our Dharma Wheel up here has twelve spokes. As he explained this, one of his students, one of the monks, whose name was Gundanya, gained what they call the Dharma. He actually saw the Deathless at his own mind. It’s expressed in the phrase, “Yam gincisamudiyatamuṁ samantam niratadhamanti.” Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to passing away. Now it sounds kind of ordinary. Everybody can see things arising and passing away. But this kind of realization comes to a mind that’s actually seen the Deathless. In other words, seen something that doesn’t arise and doesn’t pass away. Then you look back at everything else you’ve experienced, and that’s how you explain all the things you’ve experienced up to that point, all things that arise, and they’re all subject to passing away. Because this is something that doesn’t arise, doesn’t pass away. And so what this proved was that the Buddha could teach the Dhamma to somebody else. There was at least one person with little dust in his eyes. That’s why they say it was the dustless, stainless eye of Dhamma. No stains on it, no dust. He saw the Deathless clearly. Now that wasn’t total awakening. The story goes that for the next few days, the Buddha taught more Dhamma to the other monks until all five of them had gained the Dhamma eye. And then he taught them the Discourse on Not-Self. That’s when all of them finally gained total release. The analogy of the Dhamma eye is like standing at the edge of a well, looking down and seeing that there’s clear, cool water in the well. You know it’s there, but you haven’t reached the water totally. Whereas with total liberation, it’s like jumping down into the well and being totally immersed in the water. You’re totally immersed in the water. That’s full awakening. But with the rising of the Dhamma eye, you know for sure that what the Buddha said was true. There is a deathless dimension, and you can touch it through your own efforts. So that’s what we’re practicing for here, trying to peel away all the levels of activity, all the levels of suffering and stress in the mind, to see if there’s something down there that doesn’t change, to prove to ourselves whether what the Buddha taught was true or not, whether there really is something that doesn’t die, and whether we can reach it through our own efforts. This is an important part of the realization, that it’s not something that just comes floating by. You have to work toward it. There is that path to the end of suffering. That’s why the Buddha started his first talk after explaining the two wrong paths, in other words, self-torture and sensual indulgence. He started with the middle path. There is a path to the end of suffering that leads to total liberation. Total freedom leads to knowledge. So it’s something you can do. This is why we sit here meditating, because by developing good qualities in the mind, we’re developing the path. We’re following one of the duties that the Buddha realized. You try to develop concentration, develop discernment, develop mindfulness, your ability to keep something in mind, develop your alertness, your ability to notice what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing. The more you work on these things, the closer you get to the end of suffering, the closer you get to experience what the Buddha said. There is a deathless, which means that all the good things you do—as one of the Thaiajans once said, “It all starts with generosity and respect.” Those two qualities of generosity and respect carry through all the way to the end, because the realization of deathless finally means that you’ve learned to let go of things that you’ve been holding on to. You held on to because you thought you had to. But then when you learn how to let go, you realize that you’re letting down a huge burden. It’s the same way with generosity. When we’re generous with our things, sometimes our mind feels a little bit hesitant to give things away. You think you’re afraid you’re going to miss what you’ve got there. But then when you learn to give it away, you realize the sense of lightness, the sense of well-being, the spaciousness that arises in your mind. You realize that when you give away, you don’t lose. You actually gain. It’s the same with unskilledness. We hold on to these things. We don’t realize they’re unskillful many times. We like them. We identify with them. But when you learn to realize that your greed, your anger, and delusion are defiling the mind, they are standing in the way of an experience of the deathless. They are the dust that’s in your eye that keeps you from seeing the deathless. So you work on the qualities of alertness and mindfulness that allow you to see through these things and get beyond them. So every good quality you develop in the mind is part of the path. It’s taking you closer and closer to the deathless. It’s something that doesn’t die. It’s something that doesn’t disappoint. Because once you’ve found it, it’s there. You know it’ll never leave you. So that’s what we’re working toward as we meditate here, so that we can someday have the vision of the Dhamma. The Dhamma “I” will be dustless and stainless within us. And we’ll see whether what the Buddha said was true or not, whether there really is a deathless dimension. So that’s his challenge. That’s the challenge of his story. So as we sit here and meditate, we’re trying to meet that challenge to see whether or not it’s true.

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