Timeless Dhamma

August 31, 2007

When we practice the Dharma, observing the precepts, developing concentration and discernment, we’re following a path that was set out more than 2,500 years ago. And the reason we’re still following it is because it addresses a problem that hasn’t changed. It’s not as if it were designed to deal with a particular problem that came up in one culture or one part of the world. That doesn’t apply to our culture or our part of the world. As the Buddha said when he first conceived the desire to go out into the forest and to find his way, it was in response to things he noticed in his life that we have in our lives as well. He noticed that he was subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death. And that if he were to try to find happiness in things that were also subject to aging, illness, and death, that happiness wouldn’t last. He also noticed that if he, when he was young, took pride in his youth, that wouldn’t be fitting because someday he was going to be old, just like all the old people he saw around him. It wasn’t fitting that he would look down on them. If he took pride in his health, again, it wouldn’t be fitting because someday he would be subject to illness. If he took pride in the fact that he was still alive, well, someday he was going to die. So his pride wasn’t well-based. So these are the facts that the Dhamma is aimed at dealing with. The fact that we want happiness, but aging illness and death stand in the way. In those reflections we had just now, it didn’t stop with aging, illness, and death. It also moved on to separation, which is pretty much more of the same. But then the fifth reflection, “I’m the owner of my actions, heir to my actions,” this points the way out. That if we’re going to find any happiness that lies behind aging, illness, and death, it’s going to depend on straightening out our actions, finding a path of action that would lead beyond. That’s what the basic elements of the path are all about—virtue, concentration, and discernment. The Buddha’s notion of action is not just physical action or acts of speech, but also acts of mind. If we want to find a way that leads to true happiness, we’re going to have to train all areas of action, and particularly the acts of the mind, because this is where everything comes from. This is what the training is aimed at. We observe the precepts because it helps us to keep our intentions in line, keep them consistent. We realize that if our happiness depends on someone else’s misery or causing harm to other people, that happiness can’t last. It’s just a very pragmatic observation. Because other people want happiness, too. There’s a passage where King Vasanadhi is in his inner apartment with his queen, and he asks her, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” He’s probably expecting her to say, “Yes, you.” “How about you, Your Majesty?” But she says, “No.” “How about you?” she says. “Is there anybody you love more than yourself?” “Well, no,” he has to admit. That’s the end of the romantic interlude. The king leaves the palace and goes to see the Buddha. The Buddha says, “That’s true. You look around all over the world and you find no one that you would love more than yourself.” He said, “In the same way, other people love themselves. They love themselves more than anyone else.” Now, his conclusion isn’t that you should just go ahead and work for your own happiness to hell with everybody else. It’s just the fact that because everyone loves him or herself, you can’t base your happiness on their misery, because they’re going to try to destroy it. So you have to take their happiness into consideration as well. At the very least, don’t harm them. That’s what the precepts are all about. You take the precept as a promise to yourself that you’re not going to harm anyone, and then try to stick with it. Because, as you know, the mind has lots of different intentions. It can wander all over the place and make a determination one minute, and two minutes later it’s totally forgotten it’s doing something else entirely. So you have to make a vow to yourself, a promise to yourself, that you’re not going to harm anyone by killing, stealing, engaging in illicit sex. Lying or engaging in any of the forms of wrong speech or taking intoxicants. So you set up that intention, and then you have to develop mindfulness and alertness in order to maintain it. This is where training in the precepts begins to shade into training of the mind. Because without mindfulness and alertness, you forget the precept, and you don’t really notice what you’re doing. And it’s very easy to break the precept. So you’ve got to work on developing mindfulness to remember the precept, and alertness to keep watch over your actions. That’s precisely the role of concentration. As I say in the text, right concentration takes as its themes the establishing of mindfulness, which requires mindfulness, alertness, and ardency to keep watch over, for instance, the body. The “in and of itself” here means that you simply look at the fact that you’ve got a body here, and you can focus on any one of its aspects. Like right now, we’re focusing on the breath coming in and going out. You’re not concerned with how your body manages in the world, whether it’s good looking, or strong enough, or resilient enough to take on the tasks you want to take on. You just look at the fact you’ve got a body here. Try to look at the raw material. You look at the raw materials of your experience on their own terms. Then you make a practice of sticking with it. For instance, in this case, you keep remembering to stay with the breath each time it comes in, each time it goes out. That’s mindfulness. Alertness is watching the breath, and also watching over your mind to make sure it stays with the breath. If it moves off, you bring it right back. If it moves off again, bring it right back again. This is ardencing that you’re doing. You really stick with it when you’re with the breath, maintaining your focus. Ardency means trying to be as sensitive as possible to make it pleasant. In the Buddhist instructions of breath meditation, a lot of space is devoted to making the breath easeful. It’s a training. Once you get sensitive to the breath to see what’s going on, whether it’s short or long, then you train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. Then you calm the effects of the breath on the body. That makes you sensitive to a rapture, sensitive to pleasure. You become sensitive to how your perception of the breath affects rapture and pleasure. In other words, what ways of thinking about the breath can give rise to feelings of intense rapture. For instance, thinking of the breath as a quality of the whole body, not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, changes the way you relate to the breathing process. It enables you to breathe in a way that’s more satisfying throughout the body, throughout the whole nervous system, out to every pore. This makes you more sensitive to how your perceptions affect your experience of even simple physical processes like the breath. This turns your awareness more and more inward to the way the mind moves and what it does and the effects that the mind’s intentions and perceptions, the labels it puts on things. What effect this has on how you experience things, and particularly your experience of pleasure and pain, freedom and bondage. The Buddha’s breath meditation instructions are divided into sixteen steps, four tetrads. In the first two tetrads, the pattern is to sensitize yourself to a certain aspect of fabrication, either physical fabrication or mental fabrication, and then try to calm the fabrication. That points you to the mind. That’s the theme of the next two tetrads. In each of those cases, it’s more getting sensitive to certain aspects of the mind, what state it’s in, the raw materials that it uses to fabricate experience. In each of those cases, then you try to liberate yourself from any sense of bondage or any sense of being tied down. This is how concentration shades into discernment. The Buddha never makes a clear distinction between concentration practices and discernment practices. Basically, the more sensitive you get in your concentration, there you have it right there, the themes for discernment, the themes for gaining insight. This way you see how, for instance, craving can cause suffering. Then you notice that the things that you crave are really not worth the craving, no matter how much you try to create something out of these inconstant, stressful, not-self aspects of your life. No matter how much you try to create a happiness around these things, it’s bound to fall apart. It’s like building a house out of frozen ice cream. As long as the ice cream stays cold, it’s going to serve as a house, but then it begins to melt. Or even worse, a house out of frozen meat. You could stay in the house only as long as it’s cold outside. When it begins to heat up, you’d have to get out. So as you get more and more sensitive in your concentration, that leads you to develop a greater sense of dispassion towards the things that you’ve been struggling for in life. Fortunately, as you learn how to let go of these things, the mind opens up to a totally different dimension, a happiness that’s unconditioned. And that’s the solution to the problem, because this happiness lies beyond the aggregates of the body, the aggregates of the mind. It lies beyond all conditions in the mind entirely. So it’s not in any place where it could be touched by aging or illness or death. And this is why the Buddhist teachings have lasted up all these years. Even though he many times talks about the inconstancy of things, it’s not because everything is inconstant. It’s simply because we look for happiness in the wrong places. There is a happiness that is constant. There’s a happiness that lies beyond all the change in the world. Some things change, but some things don’t. The basic human problem doesn’t change. It’s still there. We still suffer. We suffer from aging, illness, and death. No matter how much we’ve come up with new medicines, they haven’t been able to stop these processes. At the same time, the path beyond these things hasn’t changed either. That’s why the Buddha said that Dhamma is akaliko, timeless. So if we devote ourselves to the practice, in other words, are willing to take on whatever is required in the practice, we can have a touch in that timeless storm as well. If we make demands, saying, “Well, nowadays things have to be this way, things have to be that way,” we miss out on what’s timeless. We stay stuck in time. Being stuck in time has aging, illness, and death over and over again. So this is our opportunity to define something timeless. So as long as we don’t take the particulars of our lives or our attitudes or our views and let them get in the way, we can have a share in that timelessness as well. (crickets chirping)

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