Resting Spots & Refuge

March 30, 2008

There’s a passage in the Canon where Ananda Bindika has gone to talk to some adherents of other sects, and they ask him, “What kind of view does the Buddha have?” And here Ananda Bindika is a stream runner. He’s already had his first taste of awakening, but he says, “I don’t know entirely what view the Buddha would have.” They say, “Well, what about the monks, his Arahant disciples? What kind of view do they have?” He says, “I don’t know that either. I can’t tell you what view I have.” So that’s what they discuss. What’s interesting is that, as I said, Ananda Bindika has already had a taste of awakening, but he doesn’t really know what the Buddha’s view on things is. There’s that simile on the leaves in the forest. The Buddha said he taught a handful of leaves. The knowledge he gained in his awakening is like the leaves in the forest. It’s a lot greater. Sometimes we wonder if the Buddha is being coy. Why doesn’t he tell us more about the forest? Why do we have to wait for awakening to find out the answers to our questions, our other questions, besides the four noble truths? Well, part of the answer may be that, once you gain awakening, the questions you would bring just fall aside. They don’t make any sense anymore. A classic comparison is the turtle. It goes up on land, comes back down into the water, and the fish ask him what life is like. Is it wavy? Is it murky? What are the currents on land? And the turtle has to keep saying, “Well, it’s not like that at all. It’s not like water.” No matter how much he tries to explain it, the fish don’t understand. Admittedly, there’s a lot about awakening that, from our point of view, seems kind of strange. How it could be a goal. No greed, anger, and delusion. What fun would that be? It’s like people on a ship out in the ocean. They like rolling up and down in the waves. They look on land and they see people and houses on land. What fun could there be living in a house on land? There’s no waves. But once you get on land, you realize you’re a lot safer. Storms can come out on the ocean, huge waves can come through and they can kill you. Whereas, at least on land, if you have good, solid shelter, you don’t have to worry about those things. There’s a sense of ease and security that comes from not having to go up and down in the waves. So awakening is something very different from even what we could imagine, as they would have said. The world is not only stranger than you imagine, it’s stranger than you can imagine. Well, that really applies to awakening. It’s something very other. For the meantime, the Buddha doesn’t leave us floundering around in the sea. He teaches us how to come ashore. Those are the teachings that are really important, the teachings on the four noble truths. The different formulations of the path and the wings to awakening. These are pragmatic teachings. They serve a practical purpose. And there are resting spots on the way. True refuge comes only with full awakening. But in the meantime, we do need resting spots, places where we can settle in for a while, gain some orientation, so that we’re not totally at sea. Because the path, after all, is something fabricated. It’s not your ultimate home. Even the concentration, the stillness that we’re trying to create here, which is called abhihana-dhamma, a home for the mind, is not the ultimate. It’s not the ultimate home, the ultimate refuge, but it’s a resting spot. The same with all the other factors of the path, like a right view. The Buddha is not concerned so much with giving us different views on the world or the Self. He wants us to look at what is it to cling to a view. He has us turn around and look at the process of being able to look at the process of having a view. It allows us to step back and keep our sanity in the midst of all the waves and storms out at the ocean. Because it’s so easy, once you get into an unhealthy view, to get stuck there. Because a lot of these views have their own internal logic, which don’t give you any way out. Some views are actually destructive to the person who holds them. And as long as you stay in the world of that view, there’s only one thing that can happen. You’re going to be destroyed. Either your desire to do good will be destroyed, or sometimes your desire to live will be destroyed. So you need a way of getting out. The Buddha teaches us about stress and the cause of stress. The cause of stress is clinging and craving, and one of the forms of clinging is clinging through views to things. This causes stress, this causes suffering. So regardless of the content, you have to realize that there are views that are healthy and unhealthy. Ultimately, you have to let go of all of them. But in the meantime, you learn to hold on to some that are actually healthy as well. One of the healthy views is this ability to look at the process of the mind’s clinging to a view. If some views are helpful up to a certain extent, then you’ve got to drop them. They’re meat. You’ve got to drop them to a point where they’re no longer helpful. That’s when the right view of the path is very useful. You can step back and pull yourself out of whatever the view has been. Because the views will tell you all about the world, and they take on a reality that they shouldn’t have that way. If you insist that your views are a representation of reality, there’s no way you can let them go, because that’s the way things are. But if you can see them as processes, then it’s a lot easier to let them go. This principle applies to everything. We work on concentration as a resting spot. It’s not our ultimate refuge. Even when the Buddha talks about having good friends as an essential part of the path, they’re resting spots; they’re not our refuge. So you have to learn how to use good friendship in a skillful way. But also realize its limitations. Friendship can’t do the work for you. At some point, it’s bound to end. But you learn how to rely on good friends for the help they can give, the advice they can give, the examples they can show you. As the Buddha said, if it weren’t for him, where would we be? We’d live in a world where no one had really proven that it was possible, through human effort, to put an end to suffering. The dynamic of that world would be very different. It’s because we have the Buddha’s example that at least we keep open the idea of what might be possible. Then we’re more likely to put in the effort. So even though these things are fabricated and ultimately will end, our relationships with people outside, the elements of the path, they are our resting spots. This is why the Buddha’s basic distinction between skillful and unskillful is very useful. We look at things in terms of the results they give, and there’s a wide gradation between really horrible, unskillful stuff and the very, very highest level of skillfulness in terms of the path. And you learn to evaluate all the various activities, relationships, and other things you can get involved with as you’re looking for the end of suffering. That’s more or less skillful. You try to sensitize yourself to see when is a particular element of the path something you want to hold on to, and when does the point come where you’re going to have to let it go? When you learn to look at things in this way, then the question of what’s it going to be like at the end, that falls into the background. It’s there as a promise. But you realize that no matter how you might try to conceive it, your conceptions can’t do it any justice. So you work on the things that you can conceive. You can conceive the idea of some things being more skillful than others. You can learn to learn how to learn from cause and effect, looking at your actions so that you see where there are mistakes, learning how to come up with some new way of acting, some new way of conceiving the possibilities of what you can do. You can’t clone awakening, but you can clone what you’ve learned about the path and then test it, test it, test it, so that you develop the sensitivity you need, so that when awakening comes, you’ll know it. And when things that look like awakening come but they’re not, you’ll know that as well, because your sensitivity has been developed. And you realize that whatever comes up, you’ve got to test it. And you accept that many of the issues that you bring to the practice might fall away as you go along. Questions that seem burning to you right now, as you gain awakening, you look at them and say, “Oh, those don’t mean anything anymore.” So try to keep in mind this distinction between refuge and resting spot. John Fullinghouse said in one of his Dharma talks, “The various stages of concentration are resting spots. The breath is a resting spot.” The different states of mind that you develop around the concentration, those are resting spots as well. You develop them because they’re really useful, always keeping in mind that someday you’ll be in a position where you can let them go, because they lead to something better. How much better? Find out for yourself. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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