The Four Duties

July 16, 2008

When the Buddha set the Wheel of Dhamma in motion, he didn’t simply set out the four noble truths. He also set out the duties appropriate to each, and the standards for what are meant to have done the duties. When you know you’ve completed those duties, then you’ve attained full awakening. It’s a very high standard. He set out those duties not as a god telling you, “You have to do this, you have to do that,” but pointing out the fact that if you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you have to do. So as we’re practicing here, the basic assumption is that you have to put an end to suffering, and you’re willing to take on the duties. In other words, there’s work to be done. You have to try to comprehend suffering and abandon its cause. In other words, you have to see suffering clearly enough so that you can also see that there’s a cause that arises with it and passes away with it. This samudiya, translated as cause-origination, has that implication as well, that the cause and the effect arise at the same time and pass away at the same time, so you can watch them. It’s not that the cause of suffering is way back in your previous lifetime. External conditions may be affected by things you did in a previous life, but the fact that you’re suffering right now depends on something you’re doing right now, and you want to be able to see that clearly. To see that, you develop the path, because that puts the mind in a position where it has the capability of really seeing suffering. Ordinarily, our typical reaction is when there’s stress or suffering or pain is to want to push it away. You don’t learn anything about things by pushing them away. You have to be able to sit with them. And you have to be able to sit with them in a way where you don’t feel threatened by them. This is why we have to practice concentration. That’s the heart of the path. That’s what gives strength to all the other faculties, all the other factors of the path. So that’s our duty, to develop concentration, to develop mindfulness, to develop right effort. These are the three factors of the path that we’re really working on as we sit here. We also try to create an environment—one that’s the mental environment that’s created by right view and right resolve, so that we understand our duties in the right way. And also, there’s a social environment—right speech, right action, right livelihood. So these are all duties we have to respect. Respect goes two ways. That chant we had last night about respect for concentration means you respect your concentration and you respect the concentration of other people. This is one of those times of year when we have lots of visitors to the monastery, and you want to make sure that your presence here is not damaged. You’re damaging someone else’s concentration. So when you speak, it’s not simply a matter of making sure that what you say is true, but it also has to be timely and beneficial. Particularly in this context that everyone else is supposed to be practicing mindfulness and concentration, you’re supposed to be practicing mindfulness and concentration. So make sure that your speech doesn’t interfere with that, that your interactions with other people don’t interfere. So when you open your mouth, ask yourself, “Which duty is this fulfilling? Is it helping to comprehend suffering? Is it helping to abandon the cause? Is it developing the path? Is it helping to realize the end of suffering?” If it doesn’t fit into any of those categories, you can just let it go. And if that means you’re a quiet person, fine. It’s supposed to be a quiet place. Try to have respect for these duties and have a sense of urgency in performing them. We’re very lucky we have this opportunity to practice. It’s not an opportunity that comes every day, even for those of us who are going to stay here at the monastery every day. We don’t know how many more “every days” we’re going to have. Aging, illness, death, separation—these things can cut in at any time. So as long as you know you have the opportunity now, make the most use of it now. If you find yourself with a couple of questions, free minutes, free hours, well, you’ve got your breath right there. Even when things are not free, try to sneak some time to be with your breath. In other words, when you’re doing your chores or you’re involved in other activities, the breath is always there. John Fung used to say, “If you want to meditate well, you have to be crazy about the meditation.” In the same way that an alcoholic is crazy about alcohol. Years back, we had an alcoholic visiting us. As he was driving into the monastery, he asked if he could borrow the car. I knew what he wanted to do. He wanted to drive out and get a drink. That was where his mind was always. He was thinking, “Where can I get the next drink?” As meditators, we could have that same sort of devotion to our meditation. Where can I get my next chance to focus on the breath? Well, it’s right here. You’ve got that chance. Take it. While you’re pulling weeds in the orchard, you can stay with your breath. While you’re working in the kitchen, you can stay with the breath. Think of it as sneaking the opportunity. No one’s watching. No one has to know that you’re staying with the breath. If you have that sense of the urgency and importance and that element of right effort of developing the desire to stick with the duties of the path, that’s when your meditation is going to develop. One way of inducing a sense of desire here is to make the breath as pleasant as possible. Realize that when you’re with the breath, the body feels a lot better because you’re paying full attention to how the energy is flowing. You can notice that there’s a blockage here. You can loosen it up a little bit. It just feels nicer to be in the body. So that you learn to associate this visceral sense of pleasure with the breath. That makes it more fun to be with, more enticing to be with. You’re free to breathe in any way that you like. Use your imagination. Think of the breath coming in through the back of the neck, the breath coming in from the base of the spine, the breath flowing in the bones, the breath coming in and out of your eyes, your ears. There’s lots to experiment with. Work on these skills because they’re going to stand you in good stead when aging, illness, and death do come. As you get older, you’re going to need to have a lot of skill with working with the breath energy. When illness comes, it’s good to know how to work with the breath energy. When death comes, it’s good to have good, strong powers of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. These are all qualities we’re going to need when the inevitable comes. When separation comes from the people we love, you want to have good, strong qualities developed into the mind so that you have your refuge. So if you find yourself getting lazy, getting slack in the practice, remind yourself, “You’ve got this time right now. You don’t know how much more time you’re going to have.” Change can come suddenly. You want to have the qualities of mind that are needed so that when change does come suddenly, it doesn’t knock you off. So the duties are all set out. They’re all very clear. It’s up to us to develop the sense of urgency, respect, and the desire to complete these duties as quickly as possible. If we’re all working at this, then the fact that there are lots of us here together, instead of being an obstacle to the practice, actually helps to energize one another’s practice. You see other people practicing, you feel more encouraged. So as you’re observing your duties with the Four Noble Truths, remind yourself that you’re not the only one who’s benefiting from it. You’re also setting a good example for the people around you.

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