Against the Stream

August 26, 2010

The practice of the Dhamma goes against the stream. There’s a sutra where the Buddha talks about the dangers that come with just going down a river. You meet with whirlpools and waves, monsters and demons. There’s the possibility of getting stuck on one shore or the other. In other words, going along with the stream is not necessarily a good thing. He talks about making an exertion to go against the stream. Or the attainment of non-returning, he says. We look at our society, we look at our culture, and there’s a lot that goes in direct opposition to the practice of the Dhamma. Sometimes we like to think that our modern culture is actually a better place to practice the Dhamma than the cultures of the past. By bringing the Dhamma here, we’re going to improve it by all the good things we have in Western culture. And there are good things in Western culture, but what seems to be happening is that all the bad things are having an influence on the practice. One problem in particular is that we’ve lost our physical skills. And all the good mental attributes that go along with having mastered a skill, or mastering a skill, have atrophied. The patience, dedication, commitment. But at the same time, the sense of self-worth that comes when you’ve mastered a skill, the knowledge that you have. A mastery that’s going to be really useful, not only to yourself but to other people. So we’re used to being consumers, but also we have this weird lack of self-esteem. We have a sense of entitlement on one hand and a strange neurosis on the other. The entitlement that things should just come to us. That’s what advertising seems to hold out as an ideal, that all the beautiful and wonderful things in the world would just come to us and we wouldn’t have to do any work. So that attitude seeps into the personality of our culture. So there’s a strong sense of entitlement. But at the same time, there’s this weird sense that people lack self-esteem. They really are neurotic in lots of ways. So what we’ve got to learn how to do here is relearn how to master a skill. And all the mental attitudes that are going to be required to master a skill—patience, dedication, being scrupulous in what you do, and at the same time learning how to keep up your determination when things aren’t going well. And as Ajahn Mun pointed out in one of his Dhamma talks, it’s normal that people will go off one direction or the other or both directions at different times. And that’s part of learning a skill as well. It’s learning how to notice when you’ve made a mistake and how to correct it. So as you’re sitting here meditating, try to take stock of what mental state you have right now. Is it right in balance on the breath, or is it not? And if it’s not, which direction is it leaning? Left, right, forward, back? Too much energy? Too little energy? The Buddha talks about the four bases of success or the four bases of power as having to be balanced. Your desire can be either too energetic or too sluggish, too scattered or too contracted. The same for your persistence, the energy you put into this, the amount of intent that you put into it, the amount of analysis you put into it. Sometimes we overanalyze things, sometimes we underanalyze things. As Ajahn Fuang once said, meditators fall into two camps, those who think too much and those who don’t think enough. And it’s part of the meditation to learn how to find where that point of balance is between those two extremes. So as we hear people making music off in the background, it’s a good thing that we’re doing that. Remember, that’s the stream. At the moment, it’s far away, it’s off on the horizon. But we encounter the stream every day. Often we find ourselves right in the middle of it. Everybody else’s defilements combine with our own defilements. And sometimes it’s just the common defilements that have bedeviled humanity for who knows how long. Plus our special Western or American defilements. And it’s important that we step outside of our normal ways of looking at things. That’s one of the things I appreciated about Ajahn Fuang. He wasn’t a typical Thai person. He had stepped out of the society. Part of this was just simply living in the wilderness so much, and part of it was the training he’d got. All the way back to the very beginning, the Buddhist teachings stepped outside of society. It’s so easy for us to say, “Well, that’s Asian culture.” But no, it’s the culture of the noble ones. It wasn’t an ordinary event in, say, Indian culture that a member of a princely family would go out and become a wanderer. And the Buddhist family complained. When he came back, they said, “The father complained.” He said, “No one in our family has ever gone for alms like this, begging for food from people. This is disgraceful.” And according to the commentary, the Buddha said, “I no longer belong to that family. I belong to the family of the noble ones. I follow their customs, their traditions.” So back to the very beginning, this is a culture that we have in the practice of stepping outside of the normal flow of society, trying to get our bearings so that we don’t get swept away by the whirlpools and the rapids and the waterfalls. We can cross over the stream. It’s a slightly different image, but the message is that you cross over the stream and then you’re safe. So even though there are parts of the Dharma, parts of the practice, that go against the grain, don’t immediately jump to the idea, “Well, this is just an Asian way of doing things.” Because Asians have their reasons, you know. It’s not like America is the only culture where people have reasons for what they do and everybody else is blinded by tradition. That’s one of the lessons I’ve learned. When the jhana for him, he didn’t explain a lot. But there were times when they did screw up the courage to ask him why he did things a certain way. He’d always have a good reason. You could tell that he expected me to try to figure out the reasons as well, not just accept, “Well, that’s just the way he did things,” and chalk it up to his eccentricity. And in trying to figure out the reasons, I learned a lot of good lessons. And in doing the thinking myself, I learned how to internalize those lessons. So this is a really important part of the practice. It’s figuring it out. I was reading the other day someone saying that we’re not trying to figure out anything out here, just kind of let the words wash over us, let the words do their work on us. But then that’s all that happens, it just washes over. And who knows what kind of work it’s doing? It’s when you experiment, try to figure things out, that’s when you really do gain knowledge, the impressionistic knowledge that comes from just letting things do their work on you. That may create a nice feeling for a while, but it doesn’t really change that much. It doesn’t really confirm anything in particular. It’s when you experiment, tinker with things, as Ajahn Lee says, and someone gives you some silver. And you know that it’s silver, but if you want to know what it’s good for, you have to do all kinds of things with it. You melt it, pour it into molds, work with it in different ways. That’s when you find out what it’s good for. It’s the same with the breath. We work with the breath in different ways. We work with the mind in different ways. Learning what happens when we step back from our normal presuppositions, try to look at the mind in a new way. Everything the Buddha taught is part of the path, the right view, which may seem to be the theory which is separate from the practice. It’s actually part of the practice. When the Buddha is talking about karma, talking about rebirth, these are views that are really helpful in putting an end to suffering. If they weren’t helpful, he wouldn’t have taught them. All the factors of the path—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration—they’re all there for a purpose. It’s not that the Buddha was enamored with the number eight. He made up eight things to teach people. These were the factors that worked. He wasn’t speaking just in archetypes or vague ideas. He was very precise. When you give his teachings a try, you take him at his word. It’s not that he explains everything. There are things that we have to use our own ingenuity to figure out. But he does leave behind tests. If you practice in this way, are these the results you get? And if you really do get the results, then what you figured out with your own ingenuity is part of the Dhamma. The whole point of the teaching is that it works. The Buddha set very high standards for what works. Some people complain that this attitude, this pragmatic approach, sometimes gets lazy. People say, “Well, it’s good enough for me. That’s all that matters.” Where good enough may not be especially good at all. But the Buddha’s pragmatism was really stringent. He had a very high standard for what works. If we’re really serious about putting an end to suffering, we want to raise our practice to those standards. Otherwise, we’ll never really know. Do his teachings work or not? That’s something really worth knowing. (crickets chirping)

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