The Dhamma Doesn’t Change

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Life changes, cultures change, civilizations change, but the Dhamma doesn’t. It’s the same Dhamma now that it was in the time of the Buddha. And as he said, previous Buddhas taught the same Dhamma. There’s a reassurance that comes with this, that regardless of the ups and downs of the present life, there’s something steady, something of real value. There’s a peculiar belief around that there’s no essence to the Dhamma, that because the Buddha questioned our idea of self and questioned even our sense of the world outside, that he was against the idea that there would be any essence anywhere at all. Everything is just kind of free-floating. And for people who want to make up their own Dhamma, that’s a thought that they use to justify it. But that’s not what the Buddha said. He said there is an essence. The essence is release. And everything else has contact with that essence to the extent that it leads us to release. That’s where there’s true rest. That’s where there’s true shelter for the mind. As that chant we have says again and again, “The world offers no shelter.” That’s the world. The Dhamma, however, does offer shelter. This is an important difference. It’s like that old idea you sometimes hear that the Buddha said, “Life is suffering, and that’s the first noble truth.” Well, there is suffering in life, but there’s also the potential for going beyond suffering. And there’s a path to take us there, something we can actually do. And it doesn’t depend on moods or whims. It doesn’t depend on the style of our particular time. It’s a path that’s there for everybody at all times. That’s why it’s akaliko, timeless. And this is what we have to hold on to. Again, we’re sometimes told that the basic teaching is that everything should be let go of. And there is a passage where the Buddha is talking to someone who’s on the verge of arahantship and says, “The Dhammas are not worthy of attachment.” But that’s for someone who’s on the brink of awakening, someone who can find a solid happiness that doesn’t require holding on to anything at all. In the meantime, though, we hold on to the path. We try to develop right view, right resolve, all the way down to right concentration. Because that’s the only really reliable thing there is that we can find. And you look at the world around you, and it’s really dismaying what people are doing with the world. And there may be some little corner where we can do something about it, but there’s so much that’s beyond our capabilities. But fortunately, the Dhamma is something within our capabilities. This is a point that Ajahn Mun would repeat again and again. Remember, most of his students were Thai peasants. And what was the message their society sent them? They weren’t worth anything. They didn’t matter. But Ajahn Mun said, “No, it’s not the case. This practice is one for human beings. You’re a human being. You’ve got all the parts of a human being’s body. You’ve got a functioning human mind. You’ve got everything you need right here.” So we should always take heart in the fact that this path is open at all times. Our problem, though, is that we turn away from it. It’s there. It’s open, as the Dukkha put it. It’s an open door. But we turn our backs on it, as if the door were shut, but we shut it to ourselves. But it’s a decision we make, and it’s a decision we can unmake. We turn around, look at the Dhamma, and go through the door as best we can. So when you begin to wonder if you’ve got what it takes, if the events of the world are weighing heavy, remind yourself there is the Dhamma. There is this opening. There is this freedom. And all it requires is a human mind and the firm intention that you don’t want to suffer. You want to do whatever you can to have genuine goodwill for yourself. There’s that reflection the Buddha has you make when things are getting tough. It’s called taking the self as a governing principle. When you think about the fact that you’ve entered on this path, and if you decide to leave it, where are you going? Back to where you were before, or worse? What kind of happiness would that provide? It would be to get away from those limitations that you entered on the path to begin with. At least when you’re on the path, there’s hope. When you abandon the path, again, you’re shutting the door that the Buddha worked so hard to open. So basically, taking the self as a governing principle means showing genuine goodwill for yourself, genuine concern for yourself, for your true happiness. And there’s so little in the world that wants to encourage you to look for true happiness and to buy their things. They want you to believe their political doctrines. They want to believe that you’re limited. So you should go for limited happiness, because they’ve got plenty of limited happiness to offer. But if Nirvana were something you could show to people, nothing else in the market would sell. Everyone would go for Nirvana. Unfortunately, it’s invisible. You can’t see it. You can taste it only through your own practice. And a lot of people are deterred right there. It’s a difficult practice. It takes a lot. But then when you think of the mass of suffering, all the dying and separation, you realize that the anguish that goes along with this wandering through and this process of samsara, you have to ask yourself, “Have you had enough?” And when you compare the suffering of the path with the suffering of not being on the path, you begin to realize that whatever difficulties there are—not really all that difficult, but at the very least, you’re doing something honorable, something noble. So many of the things that you’re forced to do in the world are not honorable or not noble. But here’s a path that gives you a sense of the value of being a human being, where you can choose what’s skillful, even if it involves making sacrifices. This ability to make sacrifices is one of the noble things of the human heart. If it’s done right. Of course, sometimes we sacrifice our values for something of lesser value. But here you’re asked just the opposite. Sacrifice a lesser happiness for a greater one, a lesser good for a greater good. That’s the encouragement that we get from the Buddha and the noble disciples. So right here is something of essence, something of real value. The Buddha uses the word “essence” in Pali as “sada,” which is the word for heartwood, the most valuable part of the tree, the longest-lasting part of the tree. The heartwood is like the twigs and branches and the outer bark and the inner bark and the sapwood. They’re connected to the heartwood as long as you don’t go for them on their own. In other words, as long as they’re part of the tree nourishing the heartwood. It includes everything from the practice of virtue, even the extent to which there’s material gain that can come in the practice. Especially the monks. We have to depend on other people’s generosity. And as long as we use that for the sake of release, then it has a portion of release, a portion of essence to it. But if you go just for that, then it’s just twigs and branches. You can’t do much with twigs and branches, especially if you’re looking to build something solid. The same goes for the practice of virtue. You’re missing a lot. The practice of concentration, you stop there and you’re missing a lot, even all the special kind of knowledge you can get through the concentration. That’s not the heartwood. The heartwood is release. As long as you’re using virtue and concentration for release, fine. They nourish the heartwood, or your ability to get there. This is where the analogy breaks down. When the Buddha talks about the essence of the Dhamma, it’s because, one, it is lasting. In fact, it is timeless. And two, it is of real value and can end all your sufferings, put an end to all that aging and illness and death and separation that many people just simply accept as part of the way things have to be. That’s what shows how radical the Buddha’s teachings were. He said, “Why do we have to accept this?” That’s a reflection he has, that there’s aging and death. This world is beset by aging and death. Is there a way out? This may have been his reflection as he had his second knowledge and saw beings dying and being reborn. So what is the essence of the Dhamma? What’s the cause of aging? There’s birth. From birth, what’s the cause? There’s becoming. How about becoming? Clinging. This is where the analysis goes into the mind in the present moment. He traced his clinging to craving, feeling, contact, the six senses, name and form, consciousness, fabrication, all the way into ignorance. This is how he moved from that second knowledge into the third knowledge. On the night of his awakening, he was looking for the causes inside. We can look at the world outside and see all kinds of things that are wrong with the world outside. In the world, we’ll always have all kinds of things wrong with it. After all, this is the human world, a place for people with mixed karma. Even the deva worlds have their problems as well. They’re a lot less. Even if the only problem is the fact that it won’t last forever. But where do the problems come from? Because there’s this insatiable craving in the mind. Craving for new becoming. Even when you have craving for non-becoming, you take on a new becoming. There’s always going to be stress. So you dig down inside. That’s how the Buddha moved from the second to the third knowledge and from the third knowledge to release. You found the heartwood there. So when you look at the world, all you can see is the suffering that’s involved in the world. You have to realize the real problem lies here in the heart, which is why what we’re doing here is so important. It’s the only way out. And here you are on that way. Make sure you stay at least on the way. Even if you don’t get all the way to the end, this is a good place to be, on the way. Because the way itself is bright, or as the Buddha said, it’s good in the beginning, admirable in the beginning, admirable in the end. That’s a fact that will never change.

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