Fighting the Three Characteristics

October 30, 2012

Here it is, the last night of the rains retreat. If you made any special vows for the retreat, a special sort of goodness in terms of generosity, virtue, meditation, you can look back on how well it went. What seemed to be helpful, what wasn’t helpful. What you might want to continue practicing, even though the retreat is over, because after all, the Dhamma is, I golly golly, timeless. It’s not the case that something done in July or August or September is different from something done in November or December, January, February, March, whatever. If it’s goodness, it’s goodness. If it’s not, it’s not. The use of having a retreat like this is that we have a chance to test something you may not have felt confident that you could take on. But you can give it a try for three months, see how it works. Some of the results will be evident now, and some of them won’t. Some of them will take a longer period of time. But still, when you’ve learned that something is goodness, something that’s skillful, once you’ve made it a habit like this, you don’t want to let the habit drop. In one of the later parts of the Canon, there’s a section called the vimanavatu and the betavatu. The vimanavatu is interesting. They have these hungry ghosts that live in palaces, part of the day. And then part of the day, if they wander out, they go back for the rest of the day in the palace. That’s because the goodness they did wasn’t all around. It was only during one period of time. Then they abandoned it for the rest of the day. So if you want the results of your practice to be constant, then you’ve got to make the practice itself constant. Ajaan Fuang talks about this in one of the few recorded talks we have. He says our days are divided up into times. There’s time to eat, and then there’s time to speak, and then there’s time to wash the dishes, and there’s time to do this, and there’s time to do that. And everything gets divided up into little times. So we have very little time to practice. But if you realize that every time, all time, is time to practice, while you’re eating, while you’re washing up, while you’re talking, while you’re doing anything, you’re being mindful, alert, ardent, and getting rid of unskillful qualities, then the practice becomes timeless. And then the results you get from the practice have a chance of being timeless as well. So this quality of constancy is one thing you want to develop. We all know that the Buddha talks about fabrications being inconstant, stressful, and not stable. But when we practice, we’re going against those principles, pushing against them as much as we can. We try to make our practice constant. We try to give rise to a sense of well-being in the mind that’s as unwavering as possible. We try to bring things in the mind under control. This doesn’t mean that you stamp out every little thought, but it does mean you gain a sense of how to deal with things. You want things to come up so they don’t disturb your stillness of mind. There can be thinking, but it can be in the background, and it will go away after a while. So you’re pushing against those three characteristics to see how far you can go. That’s what it is to create the path, to create something that is constant and pleasant, and at least to some extent under your control. Take mindfulness, for example. Sometimes it’s called the ability just to be with things as they arise and pass away, and not to react. But the Buddha never taught that. He says having mindfulness in charge means realizing that you have to give rise to skillful qualities and you have to abandon unskillful ones. In other words, there are certain things you make arise and there are certain things you make pass away. And once the good things have arisen, you try to prevent them from passing away. That’s the duty of mindfulness, to keep that in mind. So it’s when we push against those three characteristics that we finally find how far they go, to what extent they do lie across our path. But fortunately, the path here is one that gets around them, if you do it right. It doesn’t require any effort to be constant and pleasant. And at that point, the whole issue of self and non-self just gets put aside. And constant isn’t really quite the right word, because it’s outside of time entirely. That’s the other way in which the Buddhist Dhamma is at Galiko, beyond time. That’s the result of the practice. But you can’t just make the result. You make the path. You turn your body into the path. You turn your speech into the path. You turn your mind into the path, doing your best to give rise to good qualities as consistently as you can. And the results, then, are going to be more and more consistent, more and more up to the standard that you would find satisfying. So this tradition of having a reins retreat, if you know how to use it well, it’s a skillful use of time. In other words, you test aspects of the practice that push you a little bit harder. And then when the retreat is over, you say, “Okay, now that I’ve come up to the point where I can actually do these things, it would be a shame to let them go.” So whatever you find is useful, try to stick with it. Try to develop that. That’s the quality of constancy in your practice. So whether you’re here at the monastery or you go back home, wherever you are, there’s this consistency of mindfulness, consistency of alertness, working on your discernment. So it’s not just dealing in preconceived notions, but it actually works on your own defilements. It recognizes them for what they are and goes beyond them. I came across a file of quotes from different Buddhist teachers the other day. I was amazed and struck very negatively about the number of quotes where they say, “Well, ideals are just ideals. They’re not reality.” That’s the voice of someone who’s tried but hasn’t succeeded. Someone who hasn’t tried hard enough. That’s kind of the sour grapes approach. The fox couldn’t get the grapes, so he decides they must be sour. And what the Buddha said about a timeless well-being, totally free from conditions, is true. That is an ideal you should hold up. It is a standard against which you should measure the other happinesses that you look for in life. So never lose sight of that. So the only way we’re going to know about these teachings on inconsistency, stress, and not-self is to push against them to see exactly how far they’re true and how far they’re not. And it’s only by pushing that you can get beyond them. So look at where you can push yourself and not grind yourself into the dirt, of course. This is one of the principles of finding the middle way. The middle that’s not in the middle of the pillow, as Ajahn Mahaprabhu would say, but one that is appropriate. Because, after all, how do we test the Buddha’s teachings? We have to test them a little bit beyond our limits, at least, if we’re going to have any chance of being in a position where we can know whether they’re true or not.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2012/121030_Fighting_the_Three_Characteristics.mp3>