Using the Four Noble Truths

July 8, 2013

If the mind has been wandering around in the course of the day, it takes a while for it to settle down. It’s like a freight train. If you’re trying to make a stop on a dime, the train goes off the rails. This is one of the reasons why we have chanting before the meditation, to help you drop your concerns of the day and think about the Dhamma. This evening we had the chant of the Buddha’s first sermon. We had that chant, expressing thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, to get the mind in the right mood, thinking about what the Buddha had to say about suffering and the fact that it’s caused by something going on in the mind. But there’s a path of practice that you can follow that leads to the end of suffering. That’s why we’re here. And as we practice, we’re finding a happiness that doesn’t need to take anything away from anyone else. We’re showing goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for others, because you look at most of the world and the other sort that, if one person gains, another person has to lose, or a group of people gain and other people have to lose. You look at the world, and it’s a world of people feeding off of other people, feeding off of other animals, animals feeding off of other animals. You say, “Well, I’ve got to do that.” Wouldn’t it be nice to have a world where you didn’t have to do that? There’s that picture of Mercury in Sirens of Titan, where the author imagines that Mercury is a big crystal, honeycombed, with one side to the sun and the other side to the frigid expanse of space. So it sings like a crystal. And the animals look like little kites with suction cups on them. And all they do is have to latch on to the crystal and feed off the vibrations. In other words, they don’t have to feed off of one another. Then the messages they send through the crystal are two. One is, “Here I am, here I am.” The other is, “So glad you are, so glad you are.” That’s a world in which no one has to feed off of anyone else. It’s a pretty image, but I don’t think there is any place like that anywhere in the universe. It’s the kind of happiness that doesn’t cause any affliction. Anybody has to be found within. So when you think about these things, it helps to get the mind to settle down and be ready to settle down even more as you focus on the breath. So breathe deeply. Notice where you feel the breathing, and if breathing deeply feels good, keep on breathing that way. If it doesn’t, you can change. Find a rhythm that feels right for you right now. Because to find this happiness inside, we have to stay right here in the present moment, because that’s where all the mind’s decisions are being made. And we have to sort through them to see which of its decisions are leading to stress and suffering and which ones could possibly be part of the path. Because that’s the function of the four Noble Truths. It’s not just four statements about things. It’s four categories, ways of looking at your experience so you can figure out what to do with each particular experience. That’s what the Dhamma Wheel is all about. It talks about the Noble Truth and then there’s a duty that you have to do with regard to that truth. That’s why you have that category. And then finally, for the sake of awakening, you complete that duty. So you’ve got four Noble Truths, three levels of knowledge for each truth. That’s twelve. That’s why we have the Dhamma Wheel up here with twelve spokes. So if you notice there’s any stress or suffering in the mind, you want to try to comprehend it. Now, we ordinarily don’t try to do that. We try to push it away or run away from it. But he says, in order to get past it, you have to comprehend it, understand it, watch it while it’s happening, so you can see what’s causing it. When you notice the cause, which the Buddha identifies with three types of craving. Craving for sensuality, craving to take on an identity, and craving to get rid of an identity you already have. That’s to be abandoned. Our problem is we try to abandon the suffering, but we have to really abandon the cause. It’s like a newspaper article I read years back when I was in Thailand. A group of officials went out from Bangkok to look at a school in a very poor area. They were upset that the children were poor and wore dirty clothes to the school. And so, upset of trying to do something about their poverty, they said, “Well, let’s get them new clothing so they can look nice in the school and not get the school dirty.” That’s solving the result, which doesn’t really solve the problem. It just covers up things. You can’t abandon suffering. If you do, it follows you. Like a dog, you try to abandon. But you can, however, abandon the cause. So those are the things you want to look for. Now, in order to be able to do this, the mind has to be very solidly here in the present moment. Because ordinarily, when there’s stress or suffering in the mind, as I said, we try to run away. And it’s hard to sit there and just look at it and examine it until you understand it. That’s why we have to develop concentration, to put the mind in a place of stability, well-being, solidly here in the present moment, so you don’t feel threatened by the suffering and stress. When you don’t feel threatened, then you can look at it more objectively. That’s why there are certain qualities that we want to develop, like right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, which is what we’re doing right now, so that someday we can notice the ending of the craving and live at the ending of suffering and stress. So that’s what we’re working toward. That’s why we’re here. And it’s all too easy to forget about these things, because we don’t tend to use the Four Noble Truths as our framework for looking at our life. We have other issues. Especially as you go through the day and you’re working with people, and you’re caught up in the politics of the office, or you’re working with people here at the monastery, and you’re caught up with the personality issues that are inevitably here, as they are in every monastery, it’s hard to remember the Four Noble Truths. But the more you can, the better things go. The less you suffer, because you say, “Oh, instead of having the agendas that come from having my ideas about how things should be and the way they ought to be, this way and that way, and getting upset, of course, when they’re not that way.” You look more inwardly. Why am I suffering over this? Well, I’m clinging to certain things. I’m craving certain things. And this may not be the right time and place for those things. Can I learn to let go? Can I develop more of the concentration that I need, more of the stability and the equanimity, more of the patience, so I can understand exactly what is it in the mind? We say to ourselves over and over again, “We’re suffering because we’re clinging. We’re suffering because we’re clinging, clinging, clinging.” But if we don’t see the clinging in action, if we don’t see the craving in action, the words just fly right past, like words written in water. They really don’t make that much of a difference in the mind. They make some difference, but for them to really seep in and do their work, you have to watch these things as they’re happening, which is why we’re here, getting the mind to settle down. We’re practicing even as we’re trying to get the mind into concentration and we’re not ready to take on the big issues, but you can take on little aspects of them. Like when you’re dealing with the breath, getting sensitive to how the breath feels. Is it comfortable? If it’s not, you can change. What are you doing to make it uncomfortable? Are you holding a certain perception in mind about how the breath should be? And it’s not going that way? Well, maybe you’ve got the wrong perception. Look for the cause of the discomfort so you can let go of that cause. If you have no idea what the cause might be, you can play with various things. You can adjust the rhythm of the breathing. You can change your perception of how the breath is coming in and out of the body. You’re perfectly free to do so. And as you deal with the breath in this way, you get more and more sensitive to issues of stress and lack of stress in the body in the present moment. And it’s that sensitivity that will get you more in a position to see the stress and lack of stress in the mind, to apply the four noble truths to the events in the mind directly. So the concentration. As you’re developing the concentration, you’re beginning to get some preliminary exercise in applying the four noble truths so that when the mind really settles down, you can turn that framework onto the activities of the mind. So this is why we’re here. We’re changing our frame of reference from the ordinary, everyday frame of reference. It may take a little time, which is why we chant. All the chants have meanings that are appropriate for the meditation. So learn how to use them to get yourself in the right frame of mind.

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