To Test the Dhamma Is to Test Yourself

May 4, 2015

As Westerners, one of the things we like about the teachings is that the Buddha invites us to test them. We don’t have to believe everything right from the start, but we do have to have enough interest in them and enough confidence in them so that we actually will put the time and effort into testing them. In that sense, we’re also testing ourselves. How are we going to know if the teachings are true if we’re not true ourselves? This is one of the reasons why the Buddha started his instructions to Rahula with instructions on the value of truthfulness. You probably know this story. The Buddha came to see Rahula in the evening. Rahula had set out some water for the Buddha to wash his feet. The Buddha took the dipper, washed his feet, and left a little bit of water in the dipper. He asked Rahula, “Do you see this little bit of water here in the dipper?” Rahula said, “Yes.” The Buddha said, “Basically, that’s how much goodness there is in a person who tells a deliberate lie without any sense of shame.” You’ve got the sense that Rahula may have told a lie that day, and you can imagine how he was feeling. He cringed a little bit. The Buddha took the water and threw it away. “Do you see how the water is thrown away there?” he said. “Yes.” That’s what happens to the goodness of a person who tells a deliberate lie without any sense of shame. It gets thrown away. “Do you see how empty this dipper is?” he said. “Yes, yes, yes.” Rahula gets the message. Then the Buddha gives instructions on how to test the teachings, basically by pointing them into practice and looking at your intentions, looking at what you’re doing, looking at the results of what you’re doing. And if you make any mistakes, you resolve not to make them again. You can take over with people who’ve had more practice on the path. If you say that you didn’t harm anybody, then you can take confidence that you’re on the path. But all of this depends on that principle of truthfulness, that you’re able to look at what’s going on in your mind and be honest with yourself about what’s there. In other words, to test the truth of the teachings, you have to be honest with yourself about the teachings. You have to be a truthful person. You have to be worthy to test them. And if you don’t feel worthy, well, you can work on it. A lot of us would like to have a nice foolproof teaching, but a foolproof teaching would still leave us as fools. We have to develop our own discernment, our own good qualities, as we test the teaching. And as it turns out, the qualities that are needed to test the teaching, to be a fair judge of the teaching, form a lot of the path. You want to be clear in what the mind is doing. That requires that you are very mindful and alert and develop good powers of concentration so you can get the mind very, very still so it can see what’s going on. And you need the patience and endurance to widen the mind. You need to watch the mind do some unskillful things and not try to hide them from yourself. This is very important. If you can’t look at the unskillful side of your mind, you’re never going to understand it. And if you don’t understand it, you’ll never be able to work your way past it. And you need the discernment to see subtle things going on in the mind, to see connections between what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing. As John Lee pointed out, if you see causes but without the results, that’s not discernment. Or if you see the results without seeing the causes, that doesn’t count as discernment either. You have to see the connection, which requires that you actually have to be proactive in the practice. Just as you learn about eggs by cooking them, you learn about your mind by cooking it, putting it in a state of concentration to see what works, see what doesn’t work. So these are some of the qualities you need in order to be a good judge of whether the teachings work or not. And, of course, they’re part of the path. They do require that you invest some time and energy in something that nobody can guarantee that you’ll get the results the way you want or the way you conceive them to be. But as I say, if you really put the path into practice and really do follow it, the results you get are not going to disappoint. Again, the forested giants have a lot to say on this. If you have too many preconceived notions about where this is going to go, they can actually get in the way. You have to take confidence in this very basic practice of looking at your actions and trying to figure out what’s skillful and what’s not as you do things. Be willing to make some mistakes, but make sure you learn from your mistakes. There was a person who was asking one of the Buddha’s lay students one time about what the Buddha taught. The question was actually a series of questions. “What does he teach about whether the world is eternal?” “Well, he doesn’t talk about that.” “How about if the world is finite or infinite?” “He doesn’t talk about that.” “Whether the body is the same?” “The same as the soul. He doesn’t talk about that.” “After death, the Arahant?” “Didn’t you say the Arahant exists?” “Doesn’t exist.” “Both?” “Neither.” “Doesn’t talk about that either.” So this other person said, “The teacher doesn’t teach anything.” And the lay disciple said, “No, he does teach something, which is the difference between what’s skillful and what’s unskillful.” And as it turns out, paying attention to what’s skillful and unskillful is the way that you overcome doubt. There’s a sutra where the Buddha parallels the way you feed and starve the factors for awakening and the way you feed and starve the hindrances. And the way you starve the hindrance of doubt is to feed the factor of what’s called analysis of qualities. That comes down to seeing what you’re doing that’s skillful and what’s not. Everything grows out of this. There are only two categorical teachings in the whole canon. One is the Four Noble Truths, and the other is that unskillful behavior should be abandoned and skillful behavior should be developed. Of course, that means you have to learn how to figure out what’s skillful and what’s unskillful. We’ve got some guidance from the Buddha in terms of the precepts, the ten guidelines in terms of skillful and unskillful speech. There are skillful and unskillful actions, and there are skillful and unskillful mind states. The mind states that are unskillful are being overcome with greed, having ill will, and having wrong views about karma. So look at your own mind state right now. You would notice that if there’s a lot of greed in the mind, that’s something you can recognize as being unskillful. Ill will we can recognize as being unskillful, although the mind states that ill will for certain people is okay, and for other people it’s not. An important part of the teaching is learning that ill will is not good at any time at all. That’s for views on karma. The Buddha is basically asking you to believe that your actions do have results. You are responsible for your actions in the sense that you can make a choice and you can learn from your mistakes. You can change your actions. These are all good things to believe. Any path of practice that’s worthy of the name path would have to have these principles as part of the path. So there’s not much to doubt there. And then this ability to focus in on the present moment, to be alert to what you’re doing, so you can see what you’re doing and then see the results. That’s one of the basic steps in overcoming any doubt you might have about the path. Because you know, at least this next step is a good step. Staying with the breath, getting the mind more and more concentrated, more and more solid and still inside. It’s a good step, a good thing to do. So the way you overcome doubt is not by reading a lot of books. It’s by looking at your own actions. And looking at yourself requires a certain amount of self-confidence in order to look at your own unskillful sides and realize that these things are unskillful and they have to be abandoned. And not get defeated by that, or not try to deny it. In other words, the test of the Dhamma also tests you. If you’re determined, you can pass.

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