Dhamma in Line with the Dhamma

September 16, 2015

As a society, we’re used to being treated as consumers. There are people trying to sell us their product. If we don’t like their product, well, they’ll change the product until they find something that sells. But when we come to the Dhamma, we can’t think of ourselves as consumers. We’re presented with a path. We’re presented with a series of truths that the Buddha said are noble, both in the sense that they are ennobling when you take them on as your guide, and in the sense that they’re true everywhere. That’s one of the meanings of the word ariya in Pali. It’s standard. The Buddha had a very clear sense of what was Dhamma and what was not Dhamma, what worked and what didn’t work. This is why he said that when you practice in a way that shows respect for him and for the Dhamma, you practice in line with the Dhamma. Recently, I was talking with someone who had cited a passage toward the end of the Buddha’s life where he said you have to make yourself your refuge. And that other person was saying this means you can just do whatever you want, interpret the Dhamma any way you like. It’s all up to you. Everybody’s free to choose whatever way they like. And we are free to choose, but the question is, is it going to work or not? Taking the Buddhist teaching out of context, he said to make yourself a refuge, to make yourself an island, you have to make the Dhamma your island. How do you do that? You practice the establishings of mindfulness. For example, you’re here with the breath. That’s called being with the body in and of itself. You’re ardent, alert, and mindful. You’re mindful to keep the breath in mind, alert to see what’s actually going on with the breath, alert to what you’re doing around the breath and the results that you’re getting, and then ardent. This is where you have to put effort in. In other words, if you see that you’re doing something unskillful, you’ve got to put effort in. If you’re doing something skillful, you try to maintain it. You don’t just sit there and watch things come and go and say, “Oh, this is arising and passing away.” You have to actually sort out things in your own mind and the results that are coming out in the body as you’re focusing on the breath. Is what you’re doing leading in a good direction or a bad direction? If it’s leading in a bad direction, you’ve got to make coarse adjustments. If it’s leading in a good direction, what do you do to maintain it? You don’t just sit there and watch it come and go. As the Buddha said, when mindfulness is in charge, it tries to give rise to skillful states and maintain them, i.e., make them arise and try to keep them from passing away. As for unskillful states, it tries to keep them from arising, and if they’re there, you make them go away. You’re not just sitting here passively observing. You realize that you are an agent acting right now, and you’re going to be reaping the results of your actions. So you want to make sure they’re skillful. We’ve got the guidance of the Buddha, we’ve got the guidance of all the greater jhans, to give us some sense of what the skillful directions might be. The sense that you are your own refuge, your own island. You have to do the work yourself, and you have to learn how to train yourself to be a good observer, a good judge of how things are going. Again, you don’t suspend your powers of judgment. You just learn how to use them in a new way. This is what it means to make yourself a refuge. In other words, you have to change. But it’s for your own good. After all, look at the Four Noble Truths, the duties with regard to them. They’re all there to put an end to your suffering. The Buddha doesn’t tell you that you’re here to serve some purpose that somebody else has decided for you. This is one of the reasons we don’t go with the idea that we’re all one. If we’re all one, then there’s some oneness out there that’s deciding what the general purpose of things was, and we would have to just follow that and fall in line. And our desire to put an end to suffering would have to take a back seat. It would have to take to somebody else’s plan for us or some larger scheme of things. But the larger scheme of things has no purpose. It just arises and passes away and goes through many, many cycles of arising and passing away. And we’re free to choose whether we want to stay or not. If you want to stay, there’s going to be suffering. If you want to get out of the suffering, you’ve got to learn how to stop feeding on things. When the Buddha says, “Practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma,” he defines it as practicing for the sake of disenchantment and dispassion. That may sound a little cold, but do you remember his basic image for suffering? It’s because we’re feeding on things. And we tend to feed without really looking carefully at what we’re sticking in our mouths. Now, feeding here, of course, is not just physical food. It’s emotional food, mental food. We’re pretty indiscriminate. We try to gobble down and then we suffer. And, of course, the beings that are being fed are suffering as well. Even when we can make a nice arrangement with somebody else, say, “I’ll feed emotionally on you, you feed emotionally on me,” and we’ll try to look after each other, it can’t last. There’s a lot of instability in this feeding process and a lot of suffering. So we could learn how to get beyond our hunger. In other words, find something that would enable us not to have to feel hunger ever again. There’d be a sense of fullness, a sense of completeness. It’s from that completeness that we learn how to develop this passion. In other words, it’s not starving ourselves or just saying, “Well, I don’t like this.” We train the mind so we find that there’s something better than the way we’ve been feeding on things that enables us to let go. That’s how dispassion happens. That’s how disenchantment happens. And it starts with the concentration. Here we’re talking about the meditation. The concentration and meditation, of course, lie in a larger context when you’re learning to be generous and virtuous as well. Practicing good qualities and seeing how happiness comes from being generous, how happiness can come from being virtuous. And being willing to follow whatever dictates your sense of what the appropriate way of generosity would be. And that dictates to the precepts as to how we should behave. We’re willing to stretch ourselves more than we normally would. Especially in terms of the precepts, you learn mindfulness, you learn to learn alertness, you learn ardency. All the qualities you’re going to need to use in the meditation. Mindful to keep the precepts in mind, alert to what you’re actually doing, and then ardent in finding ways of sticking with the precepts in a way that doesn’t lead to unfortunate results. I was reading a while back someone saying that to approach the precepts with wisdom means you know when to follow them and when not to follow them. Well, that’s basically not following them, and that’s not wisdom. Wisdom is learning how to follow the precepts in a wise way. You stick with your principles, you stick with the promises you make to yourself at the same time. You do it in such a way that you’re not causing harm to anybody. And you learn that that stretches you. It forces you to think more carefully about things that you would normally slough off. So even though there may be some pleasures that come from breaking away from the precepts, and some difficulty in observing the precepts, if you stick with them, you find that the rewards more than make up for the difficulty. And the sense of well-being that comes from sticking with the precepts is much greater than the momentary pleasures that come from breaking them. The same with meditation. Meditation is not necessarily easy. You’re not here to follow just wherever the whims of your mind are going to take you. It’s a training. And then Buddha compares it to training an elephant. When you bring the elephant in from the forest, at first it’s going to rebel. It’s not going to be happy. But you treat it well, even though you keep it basically tied to a post. It doesn’t like being tied to the post, but you can’t let it go. But you learn to let it realize that there are rewards from becoming trained. So even though in the beginning it’s difficult to get the mind to stay here, you try to reward it with as many interesting breaths and pleasant breaths. You try to figure out different ways of working with the breath energy in the body that gets it and gives you a sense of well-being inside. After a while, this becomes your default mode, staying here. You realize it really is a better place. You may have been used to wandering around as much as you liked before, but now you realize it’s a lot better just being here. You’re really getting to know this territory here in the immediate present, what potentials it has and how you can make use of those potentials. Then you can start thinking about the things you would otherwise be doing, and you realize they’re not as interesting and not as enjoyable as they used to be. Because you see where you’re feeding on things that lead to difficulties down the way, lead to hardships, lead to oppression, lead to all kinds of unskillful things, lead to disappointment. And here we’re not just bad-mouthing the earth or bad-mouthing life in general. It’s just looking at the relative rewards that come from practicing and not practicing, of having a mind that’s trained and having a mind that’s not trained. You realize a trained mind is a lot better, both for yourself and for the people around you. This is what enables you to develop that sense of dispassion and disenchantment with the things that you use to enthrall you. This is just on the level of concentration. As the concentration gets deeper, you find there are deeper and deeper levels of realizing the old ways of doing things, the old ways of thinking, the old ways of behaving. Just don’t hold the same old appeal that they used to. You’re growing up. The thought of disenchantment, or the term disenchantment, is like sobering up. You’ve been intoxicated with things and, as a result, didn’t see things clearly. You can compare it to growing up. You understand the implications of your actions better because you’re from a better vantage point. You’ve got a higher pleasure, a higher well-being. And you gained it because you followed the path, you trained yourself, willing to do whatever needed to be done. That’s the attitude that makes a difference, that makes that dhamma in line with the dhamma, not dhamma in line with your moods or your whims. I’m paying homage to the Buddha Shakyamuni, for this way. We’re also paying homage to our own desire for true happiness, being a consumer, as we have been for so long. We’ve gotten used to the idea, “Well, I’ve put up with a lot of difficulties so I can get this little thing and that little thing, and it won’t be totally satisfying, but at least it’ll be entertaining for a while.” And we’ve been led to believe that’s the best that life has to offer. Whereas the Buddhist teaching speaks to our deeper desire. We want a happiness that’s genuine, a happiness that’s true, a happiness that won’t let us down, a happiness that’s totally harmless, something that’s good all around. So we’re paying homage to that desire. The Buddha doesn’t make us feel embarrassed to feel this way or to desire it. He doesn’t say, “You should be doing this for everybody, not just yourself. You can’t do it for everybody. The reason we suffer is our own lack of skill, our own need to feed.” We learn to overcome that need to feed by developing our skill. That’s the only way it can be done. But you’re not the only person who benefits. You pull out of the food chain. There’s one less mouth. And you’re giving good examples to others to show that they can be free too. So when you make yourself your refuge, what it means is that you turn yourself into something you can really depend on. And the path is here to show you how to do it.

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