What You Need to Know

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We tend to think of the Dhamma as words. Something you listen to, something you read. But that’s only one aspect of the Dhamma. More important is the practice. The Thai word for practice, patibhat, also means looking after somebody. In this case, you’re looking after yourself. You’re taking the words and you’re applying them to what’s happening in your mind right now, to develop good qualities in the mind. And those qualities are also in Dhamma. So as you’re meditating, the emphasis should be on what you’re doing with your mind right now. The Dhamma talk should be in the background. It’s the same with Dhamma books, as we were saying earlier today. There are times in the practice when you want to read to get an understanding. And then, after a while, you’ve fed enough on the books, in the same way that you can feed enough on food. And it’s enough for a while. Stuffing more in just doesn’t help anything. What you want to do is see what you’ve learned and how it can apply. When John Mundt, toward the end of his life, was saying that, of all the Dhamma talks, of all the Dhamma topics that he covered in his talks and in his conversations with his students, there were two that were really basic and really essential. One was the Four Noble Truths, and the other was the Four Establishments of Mindfulness. And just with those two, you can go a far way. Of course, as you get into them, you discover that they have lots of implications. Venerable Sariputra one time said that the Four Noble Truths cover all the Dhamma. Everything that the Buddha taught can be fit into the Four Noble Truths in the same way that you could fit the footprints of every animal into the footprint of an elephant. And as for the Establishments of Mindfulness, the Buddha once said that people could ask him questions for a hundred years, and he still wouldn’t come to the end of the topic. So if you want, you can think about these topics as being huge, but you can also bring them down. And for the sake of the practice, you want them boiled down, because otherwise it’s just too much to keep in mind. The basic message of the Four Noble Truths is that there is stress and it’s caused by something you’re doing. And it’s an important topic. You want to focus on it. Stress, suffering, pain, all these things come under the word dukkha. And the dukkha that weighs down the mind is the dukkha that you’re creating with your own actions. Fortunately, however, you can train yourself in a course of action that cuts through the cause of the craving. And that takes care of the problem of suffering. That’s what you need to know. So what you need to know is the path of practice. It’s interesting that the Buddha talks about the path of practice. He talks about the training of the mind to put an end to suffering and to bring about true happiness. He doesn’t define “mind,” he doesn’t define “happiness,” and he doesn’t define “suffering.” He gives examples, but doesn’t really define these terms. But he does define the training very carefully. Virtue, concentration, discernment. Those are the three main topics, the three main skills you want to work on. So right now we’re working on concentration. When the path of concentration covers right mindfulness, right effort, and right concentration, that’s what you need to know right now. Right mindfulness is keeping something in mind, like the body, at the same time being ardent, alert, and mindful. Mindful means remembering. Alert means noticing what you’re doing as you’re focused on the body, for example, focused on the breath. And ardency means trying to do it well, trying to stick with it. As the Buddha says, you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Any reference in your mind to the world outside right now is out of place. What’s relevant is just your awareness in the breath and the thoughts that you have around the breath. The Buddha calls these thoughts “directed thought and evaluation.” This is where you move from right mindfulness into right concentration. As you think about the breath and try to make it a place where the mind can stay, with a sense of well-being, with a sense of fullness, ease, and sometimes even rapture, the pleasure can get that intense. And if you can stay focused on the one object, those three factors, being focused on one object, thinking about it, and evaluating it, if you do this with sensitivity, alertness, and ardency, just trying to do it as skillfully as possible, the mind’s going to settle down. And as it settles down, it can see itself a lot more clearly. At this point, this is when it’s useful to have a few more details. Think about what you’re going to find. That sutta we chanted just now talked about five aggregates. The word “aggregate” sounds strange, but these are all activities, either in the body or the mind, that you’re doing all the time. And a good way of understanding them is to think about the act of feeding. There’s form, which in the case of feeding physically would be, on the one hand, you’ve got the form of your body. On the other hand, you’ve got the form of the food that you want to eat. To keep the body going, there’s feeling. There’s a feeling of hunger that makes you want to eat to begin with, and there’s a feeling of satisfaction that comes when you’re well fed. Perception. This is when you try to figure out what kind of hunger do you have right now. Are you hungry for French fries? Are you hungry for potato chips? Are you hungry for something more substantial? Something sweet? Something salty? What are you hungry for right now? And what out there is going to satisfy that hunger? In simple terms, what’s edible? This is one of our most primary ways of engaging with the world as children. We crawl across the floor and we find something. What do we do? We stick it in our mouths to see if it’s food. We don’t yet have the word “edible” and “inedible,” but the basic idea is functioning. Even on that level. But you want to perceive, okay, what’s food out there and what’s not? What’s going to satisfy this hunger and what’s not? And then once you find something that you think is going to satisfy their hunger, you’ve got to do something with it. That’s what fabrication is, the intentional element that changes things. And then finally, there’s awareness of all this. You’re going to find those same five aggregates in the consciousness. There’s concentration. There’s the form of the body. There’s the feeling of ease. There’s the perception that holds you with the breath. You have a metal image of the breath, or you can identify with it. These sensations are breath sensations, these are other sensations. These perceptions keep you here. Then fabrication is as you adjust the breath, adjust the mind. And consciousness is aware of all these things. So these are the tools you need to understand the mind and concentration for the purpose of going beyond the concentration. Remember, concentration is part of the path. It aims at the end of suffering. What the Buddha is having you do is get you attached to the concentration, attached to the pleasure, to wean you off your other hungers and pleasures outside that you tend to feed on. And then finally, when she’s got you here, she says, “Okay, there’s something better than this, but you’ve got to learn how to see the drawbacks even of this.” Even the pleasure of concentration has its stress. It’s very subtle. It goes up and down. But seeing the ups and downs is what allows you to see what goes together with those ups and downs. That’s when you begin to see clearly, “Okay, this is what’s causing the stress.” And when you let go of it, the stress goes away. When you can see that in action, it really goes deep into the heart. You say, “These are things I’ve been doing all along, and it’s dumb. I should have known better.” But because we tend to be so distracted by other things, we don’t watch our own minds and see that what the Buddha said is true. It is the actions of the mind itself that cause suffering. Suffering is the waste on the mind. When you stop those particular actions, there’s no suffering in the mind. In fact, the mind opens up to a larger dimension at that point. You realize that there really is a deathless dimension, and you can touch it with your own awareness. But the sense of you at that point is gone. It’s been put aside. Not that you plotted it out. Simply that it’s not relevant at that point. You come back from that experience knowing that what the Buddha taught was true. That ends your doubts about the Dhamma. Then you realize there really is an end to suffering. So these are the basic principles you need to know. Beyond this is just details, but this is the basic outline. As long as you can keep the basic outline in mind, you’ve got enough to practice on. It’s something that we come across, little problems here, little problems there, which sometimes loom very large. It’s simply a matter of figuring out where the problems fit. Within the structure of these two teachings, the Four Noble Truths and the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, you need to know how to apply them. That’s where there are so many details in the Dhamma. But the details are a lot easier to figure out as long as you keep the major outline in mind. Because that’s the outline that allows you to practice and get beyond even the dharma of practice to what’s called the dharma of attainment, which is what this is all about. In Pali, they pair the word dhamma with atta, a-t-t-h-a. Not a-t-t-a, which is self, but a-t-t-h-a, which means goal, meaning, purpose, benefit. This is a teaching that has a goal and a purpose and a benefit. The words are there to point to the practice, to get you to do the practice, so that the reality, the goal, the meaning, becomes a reality for you. you

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