Fighting the Three Characteristics

October 3, 2016

When Mahula, the Buddha’s son, went to study meditation with his father, he asked him to teach him breath meditation. The Buddha did teach him breath meditation, but before he taught him breath meditation, there were a couple of other topics he taught as preliminaries. One of the first ones was to make your mind like earth. People can throw disgusting things on the earth, but the earth doesn’t react. Make your mind like water, he said. People use water to wash away disgusting things, but the water isn’t disgusted. Make your mind like fire. People use fire to burn up disgusting trash, but the fire isn’t disgusted by the trash. Make your mind like wind. The wind doesn’t react in any way. In other words, you want to make your mind solid and enduring. Whatever comes up, you want to see it for what it is and not get all wound up in your reaction. Because all you do is just run away, run away, or try to push things away. You don’t see them for what they are. And when you don’t see them, there’s no way you can really get past them. Remembering is something you have to watch, you have to comprehend. To comprehend something, you’ve got to watch it for a long period of time. You have to be willing to be with it, not get all wound up in your dislike of it. That was one of the preliminary topics. The other one was not-self. We ordinarily hear that not-self is one of the last teachings that you apply. But actually, if you learn to apply it rightly from the beginning, it’s a very useful tool. But you have to know where to apply it. If you start right in and say everything is not-self, you just let it go, let it go, let it go. As John Lee used to say, you’re letting go like a pauper. You’re letting go like a poor person. You let go of the things you don’t have. As a result, you stay poor and no one benefits. But if you let go like a rich person, the rich person develops wealth and then lets it go, doesn’t carry it around. The wealth is still there for the rich person to use, and it’s also there for other people to use, too. Think of the Buddha. In the course of his practice, he developed concentration, he developed discernment. Then when he gained awakening, part of his awakening was putting these things aside, letting them go. But when he let them go, they didn’t go away anywhere, they were still there. So that after he gained awakening, he could still use them. It’s just that he didn’t carry them around anymore. He didn’t identify himself as the owner of the concentration or the owner of the discernment. But the concentration and discernment were still there. This means you have to know when to let go and what to let go of first. This falls in line with the three levels of right view. The first level of right view is the teaching on karma. The teaching is that your actions do give results, and they give results not only in this lifetime, but they can also give results on into future lifetimes. And what you’re living with right now is the result, in many cases, of things you’ve done in the past, combined with your present karma. So in a case like that, what you’re doing right now, that’s you, that’s yours. Pay careful attention to it. That’s where you have to be responsible. As for the results of past actions coming in, like right now you’re sitting here, thoughts come in from yesterday, they come in from the day before yesterday, they come in from last week, or who knows where. For the time being, just say, “Those are not me. I don’t have to get involved.” What you hold onto is your intention to be with the breath right here in the present moment. That’s you. That’s yours right now. That’s what the Buddha’s teaching. The self is its own mainstay. That’s where it applies, because you want to develop things in a good direction. And you have the self as producer, and you have the confidence that, “Yes, I’m the kind of person who can do this.” And the self as a consumer, “I’m the person who’s going to enjoy this.” Those are thoughts that you want to maintain on this level of right view. And they even carry into the next level of right view, which is Four Noble Truths. The Buddha doesn’t talk in terms of you or your self. He just talks of suffering or stress, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. Each of these things has a duty. You want to comprehend suffering, you want to abandon its cause. You want to realize cessation, you want to develop the path. The path is the path you hold onto. Because to develop it, you have to keep at it. The Buddha’s image is of a raft going across the river. You’ve probably heard the story. You build a raft, and you hold onto it, and you make an effort with your hands and your feet, and you get across the river. And then you can put the raft aside, either sink it under the water or pull it up on the ground, and then you walk. You don’t have to carry it on your head. But notice that while you’re crossing the river, you have to hold on tight. Because even though you may not be thinking in terms of yourself, still there’s going to be a sense of self in there someplace. You’re the one who has to be responsible. You’re the one who has to have the confidence that you can do this. What you let go of is anything that would pull you away from your concentration. That’s where you apply anatta, not self-teaching. Thoughts that come up, you say, “That’s past karma. I don’t have to be responsible for that right now.” You let it go. Pains come up. You say, “That’s not me. That’s not mine.” Focus on the breath. As you work with the breath this way, work with developing your concentration and discernment in this way, finally you will get to a point where, as Ajahn Mun says, “All four noble truths coalesce into one.” Which means that instead of having four duties, you have only one duty, which is to let go of everything. That’s when you apply the teaching of anatta to everything. That’s when you can put everything down. But in the meantime, you’ve still got to hold on to that raft. Or in Ajahn Chah’s image, you’re coming back from the market, you’ve got a banana in your hand. And someone asks you, “What are you going to do with the banana?” And you answer, “I’m going to eat it.” And they ask, “Are you going to eat the peel too?” And you say, “No.” “So why are you carrying the peel if you’re not going to eat it?” As Ajahn Chah said, “What do you use to answer that person?” He says, “First, you use desire. You have to have the desire to come up with a good answer.” There’s a case where desire is good. And, of course, then you use your discernment. You tell them, “The time hasn’t come yet to let go of the peel. If you throw away the peel now, the banana in your hand is going to be mush. You keep the peel.” So you keep the banana clean and whole. When the time comes to eat, then you take the peel, peel it off, throw it away. In other words, you let go at the right time. So right now, anything that comes up that would pull you away from the concentration, that’s not self. You don’t have to be responsible for it. Just let it go. Be responsible for what you’re doing. Give your whole heart to what you’re doing. Really hold on to it. This is your only way out of here, out of all this suffering and stress of being born and experiencing aging, illness, and death again and again and again. You hold on to that raft. It’s only when you get to the other side that you can let it go. So while we practice, we’re going against the three characteristics. In other words, you’ve got a mind that’s inconstant, but you’re going to make it more constant. There’s stress in the body, stress in the mind, but you turn them into a sense of ease and well-being. These things that are not self, you try to get them under your control. It’s in this way that you test those three characteristics. If you don’t test them, you won’t really know for sure that what the Buddha taught was true. But if you push them in this direction, you see how far you can go in making things constant, easeful, and under your control. And you can go quite far. You can develop good, strong states of concentration. And then you see the limits of how far you can go. And that’s when, as you develop the path, you let everything go. Because at that point, you see, there’s only one thing that’s better than the concentration, and that’s something that’s not fabricated at all. That’s when everything gets regarded under the three characteristics and gets put aside, let down. So right now, you’re fighting them. Put up a good fight, because it’s going to be helpful for you to really see for yourself what’s going on inside. So when you realize cessation, you know one hundred percent that that’s what it is. Because you’re giving everything here your full attention, everything you’re doing. So that when you come across something that you’re not doing, i.e., something not fabricated, you know that for sure as well. (crickets chirping)

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2016/161003_Fighting_the_Three_Characteristics.mp3>