For the Sake of the Deathless

June 4, 2021

I was reading recently about a conflict between two famous philosophers in America back in the 19th century, early 20th century, over why you would do philosophy. One of them saying that the purpose was to arrive at knowledge. The other one saying, “What good is knowledge if it doesn’t tell you what to do?” Of course, from the Buddha’s point of view, both of them were wrong. From his point of view, what good is knowledge if it doesn’t lead to happiness? What good is action if it doesn’t lead to happiness, the happiness that you can really rely on? You have to remember that’s what the Dhamma is all about. Its purpose, its atta, is to find a happiness. As the Buddha noted, the way the mind puts things together, it always has to have a purpose. There’s a passage where he defines the different aggregates as verbs. Even form deforms. We know form through its activities. Then fabrication fabricates all the other aggregates. And as the Buddha saw it rightly, it’s for the sake of happiness. The thing is, we have to keep on fabricating because the happiness we’ve gained from our activities in the past lasts for a little while and then it goes away. So we have to keep making more and more. The Buddha’s question was, “Can you fabricate in such a way that you arrive at a happiness that doesn’t disappoint, that’s not going to change?” At first blush, it sounds contradictory. If you try to fabricate a happiness that doesn’t change, it’s impossible, because all fabrications change. But what he discovered was that when we fabricate a path, we make the path skillful. Skillful in such a way that it arrives at the threshold of something that doesn’t change. In other words, it delivers us there. It doesn’t cause it. Just like taking your car and driving down to San Diego doesn’t cause San Diego. But the act of driving the car gets you there. That’s what we’re doing as we’re meditating here. We’re following a path, and we have a purpose. Those people who like to claim that they meditate with no purpose at all, you wonder what kind of equation is going on in their minds. Why bother? We meditate because we make a difference. We meditate because we’re trying to develop the skill that’s needed. When the Buddha talked about his quest for awakening, he said it was both for something that didn’t grow ill, didn’t age, didn’t die, was free from sorrow, lamentation, and all the other disappointments. He said also he was looking for what was skillful. He was looking for what was skillful as a means to get to the Deathless. So that’s what we’re working on here, trying to develop a skill that leads to something that, as the Buddha said, to see what we haven’t seen before, to attain what we haven’t attained before. So we’re feeling our way. We have a map, and it’s a map that’s just right. It doesn’t have too much information. If the Buddha had tried to give all the information, the map would become unreadable. It’s just enough to get us on the right course. But it also requires that we look at ourselves, because the problem that this path overcomes is something that lies within each of us. And you have to take care of what’s inside you. If the Buddha could have taken care of it for you, he would have done it. He had that kind of large heart. He wanted to help all beings. But he realized he couldn’t. He could speak to us, give us messages. But then we have to look within ourselves to see, on the one hand, how we’re creating the problem. And then what we can do to stop creating the problem. And that frame of mind that acts for the sake of things, that’s both part of the problem but also part of the solution. So again, it’s not that we’re here without any goal. We have a very clear goal. We also have to look at our actions, each for the sake of that we decide. Why are we doing that? Sometimes we don’t think of anything very far ahead. Our “for the sake of” is for the sake of pleasure right now. This is one of the mind’s worst habits. It doesn’t worry about long-term consequences. It thinks about just the short-term. Because it’s hungry. And if it’s not hungry enough, it can make itself hungry. And that’s a habit that we have to learn to overcome. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha compared concentration to food. The different levels of jhanis are different levels of food. The highest, of course, is the fourth. It’s like honey, ghee, butter. It’s really rich food. We learn to feed ourselves on this. So the part of the mind that likes to make you hungry will be sthamid. And you can look more clearly at the choices you’re making. When you’re well-fed, you can start thinking about the long-term with some clarity, and then it has power over the mind. The Buddha said that one of the measures of discernment is when you see that something leads to long-term harm, but it’s something you’d like to do. You know how to talk yourself out of doing it. Or if you see something that leads to long-term benefit, but it’s something you don’t like to do, you talk yourself into doing it. And it really helps if the mind feels well-fed. So even though our goal is deathless, what we’re working at right now is food for the path that will take us there. Have the knowledge in the back of your mind that, yes, there is something deathless. The Buddha said there is. All the noble disciples have said these right. But now we have to focus on the path to go there. It’s like preparing for a trip. If you simply think about all the nice things you’re going to do on the trip and the nice things you’re going to see, but you don’t pack your luggage properly, you don’t pack your provisions, the trip is not going to go very far. And you’re not going to see all those wonderful things you want to see. So focus right now on the breath for the purpose of knowledge, for the purpose of knowing what to do. Both of those have the purpose of leading to the ultimate happiness. Have that purpose in the back of your mind. And in the front of your mind, have the breath, have the mind in its attention to the breath. It’s alertness to what’s going on right now with the breath. Bring that mindfulness to the fore, as the Buddha would say. Dogon once said that the duties of the cardinal, the third and the fourth noble truths, are basically the same. You develop the path. And in developing the path, you realize awakening, you realize the cessation of suffering. It’s not someplace else. Some people have read his teachings that it has to mean that the path and the goal are the same. But that’s not the case. It’s in the doing of the path that you also do the doing of the third noble truth. So you focus right here, this breath coming in, this breath going out. Pay a lot of attention to the breath, because it is your path. And you can make it as smooth as you want. It’s probably one of the reasons why the Buddha recommended breath meditation more than anything else, because of the different elements of the body. It’s the one that’s most responsive to your intentions right in the present moment. It shows you very clearly. You hold this perception in mind, and the breath will be one way. You hold another perception in mind, and the breath will be another way. Then you can judge which perception helps you settle down. Which intention helps you settle down. And then you use that knowledge, both to develop a concentration and to develop discernment. As you start seeing the mind, you start seeing the fabrications in the mind. And in doing this very consciously, you dig up a lot of things that you do unconsciously that you might resist. But it’s only when you counteract them that they’ll show themselves. And then you figure out your way around them. So it’s by paying very careful attention to the mind that you get to that goal that seems so far away. But you have to remember, when it’s found, it’s going to be found right here. This is apparently what the Buddha meant by saying that it’s touched with the body. We experience the body right now. That’s where it’s going to appear. So it looked very carefully right here. Settling down with the breath, your purpose, you find that leads deeper and deeper to deeper purposes. So give this your full attention. This is the fullness of attention that leads to a sense of fullness of mind. Closer and closer to the goal.

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