The Buddha’s Awakening (outdoors)

December 25, 2022

We should reflect on how fortunate we are to have the opportunity to practice the Dhamma. As the Buddha said, there are different kinds of actions that we do. There are what he called dark actions and actions that lead to suffering, bright actions that lead to good rebirths on the human level and above the human level, and then there’s the actions that are neither dark nor bright. That’s an ungrateful path. That leads beyond rebirth to a happiness that doesn’t change. So basically the Buddha is saying that we have it within our power to find true happiness. You think about the teachings that existed before his time or during his youth. They all tended to deny the power of human action. People had no power at all. Everything you do is the result of the laws of physical atoms, physical properties. Others taught that everything you did was going to lead to suffering and the only way to find true happiness would be to stop doing anything at all, just lie down and die. The Buddha’s teaching was special. He said there is a kind of action that leads to the ending of action. It’s based on qualities in the mind that anybody can develop. We all have them. Hatefulness, ardency, resolution. Some of us are stronger than others in these qualities, but we all have them to some extent. What was special about the Buddha was that he developed these qualities all the way. As he said, he looked for what was truly skillful. He looked for something that wasn’t subject to aging, illness and death. And so when he finally got on the right way, on the night of his awakening, the first question he asked was, “Is death the end? Is it annihilation? Or is it something that follows on death?” And in his first knowledge he saw that he had been reborn many, many times. What was especially interesting was that he wasn’t reborn as the same thing all the time, sometimes as a human being, sometimes as a heavenly being, sometimes as a lower being. There were people in that time who said that whatever you were in this lifetime, you were always going to be in future lifetimes. If you were a Brahmin, you’d be a Brahmin. If you were untouchable, you’d be untouchable forever. If you were a dog, you’d be a dog forever. But he saw that that wasn’t the case. People take on many roles. They take birth in many different places. But he still didn’t see why. Why do you go up? Why do you go down? That question was answered in his second knowledge. He saw beings dying and being reborn because of their karma. Having done skillful things, they tended to go up. Having done unskillful things, they tended to go down. It was all based on their views and whether they listened to people of wisdom or not. But even then he saw that the system wasn’t safe because, on the one hand, you go to the highest levels and then you fall. There’s no place in the cosmos where you can be reborn and stay forever. And even in one lifetime, you may do a lot of good things and then just before you die you develop a wrong view, and that wrong view will pull you down to a lower rebirth. You haven’t been doing very many good things in this lifetime, but you suddenly develop a right view towards the end and it will pull you up. So he saw that even goodness within the cosmos was not reborn. It wasn’t reliable. The question was, is there somewhere you can get beyond that to find something that is reliable? That’s what he found in the third watch. He looked directly into his own mind, and particularly he looked at his views, because in his second watch he had seen the power of views. Wrong views can cancel out a lifetime of good actions. Right views can cancel out a lifetime of bad actions. Would there be views that could get you out of the cycle of action entirely? He saw that there was. He looked directly at what the suffering was in his mind. He saw that it was in the clinging. The clinging was caused by craving. It was possible to put an end to the craving and thus put an end to the suffering, and he did that by developing the Eightfold Path. Suffering was to be comprehended. Its cause was to be abandoned. The cessation was to be realized. He had to do that by developing the path. So he developed the path. That was how he found the Deathless. He found that there is a type of action you can do that will take you to something that lies beyond action. A goodness that really is reliable. A happiness that is reliable, because it lies outside of space and time. It doesn’t change. That’s the good news of his teachings, that we do have it within our power. Through the views we develop, through the actions we develop, based on our views, at the very least we can change the course of our life in a good direction, and even better. We can go beyond having to come back and be reborn ever again. That way we can find true happiness. We’re pointing again and again and again at the importance of our actions. This is why true wisdom is not a matter of just knowing abstract teachings like dependent core arising or emptiness or not-self. It lies in looking at your actions and seeing what results they’ll have. And if you see that there’s something you’d like to do but it’s going to give bad results, you know how to talk yourself out of doing it. If there’s something you don’t like to do but gives good results, you learn how to talk yourself into doing it. In other words, you don’t take your likes as the measurement. You don’t do something just because you like it. You don’t avoid something just because you dislike it. You have to look at what the consequences are going to be. That’s the beginning of wisdom. So look carefully at your actions and look at their results and learn from the results. If you see you’re doing something and it’s causing suffering, well, stop. If it’s causing harm, stop. Ask yourself, “What else can I do? How else can I approach this issue?” If there are people you trust, you can ask their advice. An important thing is that you don’t settle for just okay. As the Buddha said, the secret to his awakening was not resting content with skillful qualities. Before he had gotten on the right path, he’d started with other teachers and actually completed their teachings. They said, “Well, that’s it. That’s as far as a human being can go.” But he said, “This isn’t good enough.” He learned good qualities in the course of doing those things, but it wasn’t good enough. Even on the night of his awakening, when he gained that first knowledge, there were other people who had gained a similar knowledge prior to him, and they got satisfied right there. They knew their past lifetimes. And so they stopped. There are people who gained a knowledge similar to his second knowledge, seeing how beings are being reborn in line with their karma, and they get satisfied with that knowledge. So they wouldn’t go any further. They set themselves up as Ajahn’s teaching about rebirth. But he wasn’t satisfied. He kept saying, “There must be something better than this. There must be a happiness that doesn’t require conditions at all.” It’s because he didn’t rest content with the lesser things. That’s why he was able to attain the highest. Now, this doesn’t mean he threw those things away. After he taught, of course, after he started teaching, he would use his knowledge about previous lifetimes, his knowledge about karma and rebirth, to explain to people why they had to practice. He still continued doing concentration. It’s just that he realized that these things were good in that they were useful for some higher purpose. So as we live our lives, we have to abandon all pleasures of the senses. He just says, “Look at the pleasures of things you see and hear and smell and taste and touch.” And if you find that enjoying those pleasures does not make your mind intoxicated, doesn’t give rise to unskillful qualities, then they’re perfectly okay. There’s no need to torture yourself. But if you find that they do give rise to unskillful qualities, those are the ones you’ve got to abandon. The same with the pleasure of concentration. Even though we know that it’s not the ultimate, we don’t throw it away. I know all too many people who do a little bit of concentration. They say, “Well, I’m afraid of getting stuck on concentration. I want to move on to discernment.” And they drop the concentration. But the discernment needs the concentration as its foundation. I had this problem when I started practicing myself. I was staying with a Jon Foong. A lot of his students would have visions. And when he would teach, he would teach groups of people. And if he sensed that someone would have a vision, he’d ask them right there. He was very sensitive this way. And they’d say, “Well, yes, I had a vision like this, this, this.” And then he’d say, “Okay, this is how you deal with that vision to get past it.” I wasn’t having any visions at all, so I kept thinking, “Well, I must not have good concentration.” So I’d throw away the concentration I had and try to find something else. It wasn’t until I realized that the higher levels of concentration have to start out from the lower levels. In other words, you maintain what level of concentration you have and it gets stronger, it gets deeper. So being dissatisfied with skillful qualities doesn’t mean you throw them away. It means that you look after what you’ve got, but you know that they’re for a higher purpose. Otherwise it’s like wanting a tree, a big tree. So you plant the seed and a little tree comes up and you say, “Oh, I don’t want a little tree, I want a big tree.” So you cut the little tree. Another little tree comes up, you cut that one because it’s not a big tree. You’ll never get a big tree. You take care of what you’ve got, just knowing that there’s something better and that you can use this for a higher purpose. That’s what it means to be dissatisfied with skillful qualities. That’s how we follow in the Buddha’s footsteps. We’re not asking him to come and do the work for us because, after all, he said it’s through our lack of skill that we suffer. And nobody can make anyone else skillful, but you can develop skills on your own, keeping in mind the principles that the Buddha had, looking at the results of your actions and measuring your actions by their results as to whether they’re skillful or not, learning from your mistakes, and not settling for second best. Because, as his awakening showed to us, it’s possible for everyone to attain the best if they put their hearts to it. That’s the good news of his teachings, which is why we should be glad that we have the opportunity to practice those teachings, because there’s no other teaching in the world that puts so much power in our hands.

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