In the Context of the Path

May 29, 2024

The Buddha’s first sermon was on the Noble Eightfold Path. The last person he taught focused on the topic of the Noble Eightfold Path. That’s the analogy or the metaphor that he used as a framework for what he was teaching. He was teaching a training, something to do. Some of the other teachings that we learn about, that were taught at his time, would always start with a picture of the world. The world is like this. These are the principles. What reality is out there. And you would tend to stop right there. They presented a picture, but didn’t tell you much what to do with it. Whereas the Buddhist teachings are all about what to do. We’re suffering and we need to put an end to suffering. That’s how you do it. It’s good to keep that in mind. The Noble Eightfold Path, starting with Right View, which is the Four Noble Truths, is the main framework for everything else. So whenever you read a teaching of the Buddha’s, you ask yourself, where does it fit in the training? Where does it fit in this course of action? Because there is a tendency sometimes to focus on the three characteristics as the Buddha’s description of reality. And then within the framework of that description, everything else gets squeezed. But what are you to do with those three characteristics? You can think about things being inconstant, stressful, beyond your control. And you can come to all kinds of conclusions Some people adopt a materialistic view. Well, there is no self, there’s nobody there, so you’re not responsible for anything. You have no free will. I mean, given just the three characteristics on their own, you could come to that conclusion. But when you see them in the context of the Noble Eightfold Path, and you realize that the Buddha himself never called them three characteristics. He called them perceptions. The perception of inconstancy, the perception of stress or suffering, and the perception of not-self. And those play a role in two of the duties. The duty to comprehend suffering, and the duty to abandon its cause. Because what is suffering? The Buddha gives a list. There’s the suffering of birth, aging, and death. The suffering of not getting what you want, having to deal with what you don’t like, having to be separated from what you do like. All of that we know. And then he says it all comes down to the five clinging aggregates. That’s not immediately obvious. Which is why it’s a really important insight. We’re suffering from the things we’re clinging to. We have to comprehend that. In other words, understand it to the point where we have no passion, no aversion, or delusion around the suffering that you’re causing through your clinging. Of course, the clinging itself is caused by craving. Craving for sensuality. Craving to become, take on an identity in a particular world of experience. Or the craving to destroy whatever identity you already have. Or whatever world you’re in. Because you’re finding it’s not satisfying you anymore. And then the Buddha says, you’ve got to abandon the way to understand the relationship between clinging and craving. Think of the meaning of the word dhanha in Pali, which means not only craving, but also thirst. Upadana, the word for clinging, means not only clinging, but also taking sustenance, or actual sustenance, food. So when you’re thirsty or hungry, you’re looking for something to eat, and then you find something. This is one passage where the Buddha talks about the stages. You thirst for something, and you go out and you search for it. You find something, and then you try to ascertain what it is. Does this satisfy your criteria for what you want to feed on? And if you decide that it does, then you latch on to it. You develop desire and passion for it. That’s the clinging. And then you get possessive. And when you’re possessive, there can be battles. So these are the things you’re trying to avoid, the battles and the suffering. Because as the Buddha said, even if you’re not battling somebody else, the fact that you’re holding on to something that’s going to change. Or the fact that you’re holding on requires stress in and of itself. You’ve got to learn how to see these things as inconstant, stressful, not self. See the objects of your clinging as inconstant, stressful, not self, as a way of comprehending them. Seeing the act of clinging itself as inconstant, stressful, not self. And see the craving as inconstant, stressful, not self, so you can abandon it. That’s the function of those three characteristics. And the Buddha talks about the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, as being categorical teachings. In other words, teachings that are always true and always beneficial. But there are only two teachings that he classifies that way. The other one is a more general one, that you should abandon or avoid unskillful actions in thought, word, and deed. And that you should try to develop skillful actions in thought, word, and deed. That’s it. Those are the only two teachings the Buddha said are true and beneficial across the board. The three characteristics, or the three perceptions, he said, are always true, but they’re not always beneficial. As we discussed today, if you apply them to the path too early, you’re going to abort the whole thing. You see that the path is made out of aggregates? Well, you’re supposed to let go of aggregates, right? So even before you’ve got the mind in concentration, you try to develop discernment. And that can stop you from developing what you need to develop. Think of that image of the raft going across the river. You make a raft, because this side of the river is dangerous and the other side is safe. What do you make the raft out of? You have to make it out of the things you find on this side, because there’s no nibbana yacht that’s going to come over and pick you up. There’s no nibbana bridge already made. You have to put things together yourself. Make it out of the twigs and branches and leaves on this side of the river. Put it together as best you can, and then try to maintain it as best you can as you go across the river. You hold on tight to it, and if it looks like it’s getting loosened up, you have to tighten up the vines, you have to tighten up the different parts so the whole thing doesn’t just fall apart. Then you get to the other side. That’s when you can let the raft go. So there are stages in the path. The duty with regard to the path to begin with is to develop it. Whatever is needed, put it together. You put together the twigs and leaves. Your discernment is made out of aggregates. Your concentration is made out of aggregates. Your intention is made out of aggregates. If you observe the precepts, those are aggregates as well. So you don’t take them apart until they’ve gotten you over to the other side. It’s so important to keep remembering we’re here training as a course of action. The Buddha could have spent his life talking about all the wonderful things he saw on the night it was a week ago, and that he continued to see. There are passages where they talk about the Buddha going into the forest for seclusion. He didn’t want to see human beings except for the one monk who would bring him his food. And so who knows what he was doing in the forest, sitting and meditating? What was he learning in his meditation? It doesn’t say. But there are times periodically throughout his life that he would go and get secluded like that. He wasn’t just resting. There’s the work that the Buddha had to do, not only teaching human beings, but also teaching devas. He could have talked about all the cool things he saw, but he didn’t. He kept focused on his task, which was to teach people the path, the practice, that when they follow it will lead to the end of suffering. His teachings are amazingly focused that way. So always keep that analogy in mind, keep that image in mind. We’re following a path. We want to stay on the path. Don’t wander off to the side. And don’t destroy the path in the meantime. Some people are like a person who’s going to the Grand Canyon, and you know that the Grand Canyon is like a big ditch, a really big ditch. And so you come to a spot in the road and you start digging a ditch in the road. You get it so big that you can’t get across. It’s not the Grand Canyon. You’ve destroyed your path. So make sure that you do everything you can to keep that path together. Or if you think of the raft, do everything you can to make sure the raft doesn’t start unraveling. Have a sense of time and place. And as for whatever teachings you learn that the Buddha taught, remember they’re part of a training. They’re meant to be used somehow. They’re not just there to decorate the inside of your brain. They’re tools. Some of the tools are like maps. Some of the tools actually work directly on your mind to make you see things in a new way, or to develop new strengths inside. So when you see them all as part of a training, you’re more likely to get the best use out of them and have a good sense of what tools you pick up at what point in the practice. And when you put them down, that’s when you can be said to have right view about what we’re doing here.

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