The Whole Dhamma Tree

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There’s a theory about Buddhism that I call the amoeba theory. That Buddhism has a will, it wants to survive. And as it moves into a new environment, it will make changes so that it can survive and adapt. And this is a theory that informs a lot of Western thought about Buddhism. But notice, it’s about Buddhism as a social movement. Because after all, Buddhism isn’t a living being and it doesn’t do things. People do things to it. They make changes. They’re the ones that make it change and adapt to a new environment. And just because there’s been an adaptation and it survived, doesn’t mean that it’s necessarily good. Because the real meaning of Buddhism is not in the social movement. You have to think instead in terms of the Dhamma. The Dhamma the Buddha discovered that he tried to convey. That the Sangha and other people have been trying to maintain for many, many years. That’s something else. Now the heartwood, you might say that Dhamma is release. As the Buddha said, it has a single taste, the taste of release. But he himself makes a comparison with a tree. We come to the Dhamma, we try to get the heartwood, which is not a social movement. It’s a movement inside the heart, trying to find freedom. The Buddha offers that as a possibility. As for the other parts of the tradition, the Buddha says there’s like twigs and leaves, bark, softwood. But he never says that they should be changed. Or that they’re not important. After all, a tree that is only heartwood would be a dead tree. It needs the bark and it needs the leaves in order to survive. Which is why, even though we’re aiming mainly at the heartwood, we can’t ignore the twigs and the leaves and the bark, the precepts, the customs. These are all part of what has kept Buddhism alive. Some of these may adapt. And it’s the people who do the adaptation. And the question is, have they done a good job or did they do a bad job? There are certain adaptations that have been made over the centuries that were not really good. But there are others that are. And the people who get the most out of the teaching are not the ones who try to change things to suit their preferences. In the course of their quest for awakening, their quest for release, those who have found what works will pass that along. Those are the ones you want to listen to. Those are the ones you aspire to emulate. So as we’re living here, we’re not just doing this for ourselves. We’re part of a larger tradition. So it’s good to keep that in mind. There’s a lot to learn from the tradition. Even in simple things like chanting, bowing down, the custom of respect, the custom of trying to internalize the teachings, and honoring the teachings by trying to pronounce things properly if we can. It’s one way of showing respect. Because respect is something that lifts you out of yourself. You decide that your greed, aversion, and delusion should not have the final saying. They should have somebody over them, something over them. They tend to not want it. All too often we’re thinking about release and freedom. We’re thinking about freedom for greed, freedom for anger, freedom for our delusions. And people have been exercising that kind of freedom for a long time. And look where it’s gotten us. People talk about nuclear war as a very reasonable alternative now. If those are the values of the world, we certainly don’t want to adapt to those values. We want to keep our sights focused on this possibility of release and do whatever needs to be done, both for our own sake and for the people who come after us. We’re part of a long, long, long tradition. You can find throughout the history of Buddhism that those who benefited the most from the Dhamma were those who tried their best to fit themselves into the Dhamma. This is what the John Mund students would all say about him, that he was entirely Dhamma. He had his personality, of course. He had his sense of humor, his way of doing things. But whenever he saw that something he was doing was not in line with the Dhamma, he would change. He did his best to bring the original tradition back to life and to pass it on to others. Of course, the best way to pass it on to others is to find benefit in the teaching yourself. Then we can pass it on with sincerity and the people we are passing it on to will be impressed that you’re not just speaking words but you actually embody what you’re saying. John Lee gives an analogy. He says it’s like a recipe for medicine. It may be written on a little scrap of paper. And if you haven’t tried the medicine or haven’t experimented with it to see whether it works or not, that scrap of paper could very easily get thrown away. But if you have tried the medicine and found that it works, you take very good care of that scrap of paper. And so as you’re practicing, as you begin, it’s hard to sort out which parts are essential, which ones are not. And so out of respect you say, “Well, I’ll take on whatever the tradition says and give it a fair test.” Think about that passage in the Kalama Sutta. So many people translate it as, “Well, go by your own sense of right and wrong.” If that’s what the Buddha’s message, it would have disappeared a long time ago, because everybody goes by their sense of right and wrong. There would have been nothing special. But as he says, you take a teaching and you put it into practice to see what the results are. In some cases you’ve had enough experience in life already to know what kind of results you get from, say, breaking the precepts, being greedy, giving in to your anger, giving in to your delusion. You’ve seen enough of that to have a good idea that it’s not a good path to follow. But there are a lot of things you’ve got to test. And so you have to see the worthiness of testing them. Some people say the Buddha doesn’t ask for any faith at all. Conviction is one of the strengths, it’s one of the protections. In the analogy of the fortress, you start with conviction as your foundation post. That’s what the fortress is all built on. The conviction here is that, at the very least, the teachings are worth testing, because they’re going to take a lot out of you. A fair test requires a lot of dedication. So you have to see that it’s worthy and you have the conviction. The conviction that you’re willing to submit to the teaching to really understand them, to really practice them. And then you can say, in all fairness, that they do work or they don’t work. And they demand that you develop certain qualities like mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment. These are all things that help in your ability to be a fair judge. So you take these things on. Something bigger than you are. This tradition has come down and has been praised by many people who are worthy of praise. So whatever is required, you do it. That phrase, “The great way is not difficult for those who have no preferences,” doesn’t mean that you don’t prefer anything to anything else. You do prefer the end of suffering to suffering. You do prefer release to your continued entrapment in samsara. What it means is, whatever is required, you’re not going to let your likes and dislikes get in the way of doing what’s required. And as for the people who say, “Well, I’m not going to commit myself until I have something proven,” nothing’s going to get proven. And the very condescending attitude that people have that the Buddha couldn’t express himself properly and made me, he was just a prisoner of his culture, that goes nowhere. In his awakening, he was able to step out of his culture. Having stepped out, then when he stepped back in to talk to people, teach it, he was able to sort through what in his culture was worth saving, what was not. But he submitted himself to a really rigorous regimen. He tested and tested and tested again whatever path of practice he was going to follow. When he said that the Dhamma is nurtured by commitment and reflection, he was talking about 100% commitment. In his case, he found that there were a lot of false paths, but he knew that they were false because he had committed himself totally, and he could be a fair judge. And so he points out why those paths were not good paths. And if you decide that makes sense, you don’t have to follow those paths. Follow the one that he said does work, and make yourself worthy to be someone who tests that path by giving it your all, by trying to maintain the heartwood and the softwood and the branches and the bark and the twigs and the leaves. Because it’s only after you’ve gotten to the heartwood that you can sort out which of those twigs and leaves are just garbage piled on by other trees, and which ones are actually coming from the heartwood itself. So give the whole Dhamma a chance. That’s when you really get to see what’s genuine Dhamma and what’s not. At the same time, you can become a witness to what really is valuable in the tradition, what’s not. And you can be part of that force that passes it on.

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