What’s Important

June 19, 2024

In the transcript of one of Ajahn Mahaprabhu’s Dhamma talks, he gives a little preface saying that it was given in response to a question posed by one of the more important monks of our day and age. When I first read that I thought he was talking about one of the senior monks in Bangkok. Later, though, I found out that from one of his students that was not the case at all. It was a monk who was not well-known, a member of the forest tradition, but who was assumed to have become an Arahant. This makes you stop and think. What does it mean, “important”? We’ve been trained to believe that the important people of the world are those who have power, are those who are creative, those who play a big role in history. And sometimes this attitude spills over into history as a Buddhism. They talk a lot about the people who’ve made innovations in the tradition as it’s been passed on. But what’s important in terms of the Dhamma? As the Buddha said, what he wanted was students who would practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. That means not only in line with what he taught, but also for the purpose for which he taught it, which is for disenchantment, dispassion, release. That’s the important work. When people tell us that we should be doing things for society, usually it’s one person’s defilements fighting another person’s defilements. If we want to do something important in the world, first we have to straighten ourselves out. That’s where the important work is. After all, look at the Buddha. As we mentioned today, there was slavery in his time, but he didn’t go out against the institution of slavery. He went out against the institution of greed, aversion, and delusion in each person’s mind, starting with his own mind. So when people make deprecating remarks, and it’s sad, sometimes we hear even monks making deprecating remarks about people who sit with their eyes closed. We should remember that their attitude has very little to do with the Dhamma. After all, the Buddha discovered that we suffer because of things inside the mind, and in the course of suffering we tend to create burdens for other people. One of our wishes for goodwill is, “May I look after myself with ease. May other beings look after themselves with ease.” In other words, “May they not be burdens. May I not be a burden on other people.” That’s an attitude the Buddha said we should think about every day. The best way not to be a burden is to train your mind. So you’re doing important work right here. On afternoons, when the afternoon seems long, and you’re sitting there. In a couple days we’ll be sitting in heat, in the hot weather, and your mind doesn’t seem to settle down. It begins to seem sort of futile, and you start thinking about other things that would be more useful to do, more beneficial to do. Remember, there’s nothing more beneficial than straightening out your mind. Whether you’re seeing immediate success or not, it’s not the issue. It’s that you keep at it. Because it is something that requires training. And it’s something we can do. Because people’s value lies in how much change they’re able to make in the world. There are a lot of things that resist changing. You try and try and try and cannot change it. What does that say about your value, if that’s how you’re going to measure it? But in terms of your own mind, you can make changes. When the Buddha explained his principle of causality, he was saying that some things are influenced by past actions, but not everything. In fact, if there were people who said that everything you experienced right now was the result of some past action, he would go and argue with those people. He was not the kind of person who would go around picking fights. But he saw that as a serious wrong view. He said it was a view of inaction. Because it meant that what you’re doing right now doesn’t make any difference right now. This is one of the reasons why his teaching was so revolutionary at that time. You look at the other teachings that were expounded on. A lot of them started with physical principles about this is how the world is. And human action is meaningless in the context of their worldviews. Largely the materialist worldviews of the Ajjivakas. Or the Brahmins. Well, you couldn’t do anything on your own. You had to depend on the Brahmins to do the sacrifices and prayers and other things for you. Or the Jain saying, if you do anything at all, it gets in the way of your freedom. They’re all talking about powerlessness. But the Buddha is saying, you have this power right here, right now. How far you can go in changing the present moment through your present actions. That’s something you’re going to learn through experimenting, through trial and error. And also dealing with the fact that some past actions have really strong results and others have weaker results. That’s something you have to learn how to read. But you read it by doing what you can in the present moment. Doing what you know is skillful. And having trust in the Buddha when he says that it is skillful. Whether it shows its results immediately or it takes time. That’s not the issue. This is why the teaching does require conviction. I’m going to read that its aim is the end of passion and desire. That may seem discouraging, but actually there’s a lot of encouragement buried in that statement. It’s basically saying that the important issue in the world is not what people are doing outside, it’s what you’re doing in your own mind. And you do have the power to put an end to your unskillful actions. That’s good news. Because there is a joy that comes with a sense of agency, a sense that you can make a difference, you can change things. We’re not helpless. We don’t live in a big cosmic machine that just makes us into little cogs. We play a large role in shaping our experience. The downside of hearing that the goal is the end of passion and desire of course is that so much of what we like in life is based on our passions and desires. In fact, everything that we experience, as the Buddha said, is rooted in desire. That’s why we have to train. But the training does work. And it does make a difference. And it does put an end to suffering. The Buddha himself confirmed this. All of his Arahant disciples, all of his noble disciples have confirmed this as well. And they’re reliable people. I was reflecting the other day on the irony of the fact that people in my generation and before my generation who went to Thailand are coming from the hippie generation, the time of revolutions in the West, or attempted revolutions. In Thailand, who do we end up studying with? The most conservative people in the country. The ones who held to the Buddhist teachings as they were. And the reason was because we found that the people who held to the teachings weren’t the most reliable people we’d ever met. So when they say that this is the work that’s important, and it can be done, it’s going to be hard sometimes resisting your old habits of running after your desires. But you realize your desires are not all monolithic. They’re not all running towards sensuality. There’s a desire in the mind for freedom. There’s a desire in the mind for integrity. There’s a desire in the mind to be honest, to be truthful. These desires exist too. So it’s not that we’re totally denying desire. It’s simply sorting them out and trying to give prominence to the ones that are most honorable within us, the most noble within us. Years back when I was first here, back teaching in America, one evening in a group in Orange County, there was the word “dignity” in a Dharma talk. And after the talk, a Russian woman in the group came up. She’d been in the States for about a decade. And she mentioned when she learned English in Russia, she’d learned the word “dignity,” knew what it meant. And she said since coming to America, she hadn’t heard the word at all until that night. Which says a lot about our culture now. It also says something about how dignity is something that we would like to have. There’s that desire within us as well. So the Buddha has this honor, the most important, the most honorable, noble desires within ourselves. And he gives us encouragement saying this is important work, and it’s work that can be done. When the practice seems dry, the results don’t seem to be coming as fast as you like. Remind yourself that by sticking with the practice, you’re doing important work. The results are bound to come.

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