Thinking Seriously About Happiness

June 27, 2024

The passage we chanted just now, starting with “the world is swept away,” ending with “the world is a slave to craving,” comes from a sutta, a discourse in the Canon. It tells the story of a young man who heard the Buddha teach, was inspired by the teaching and wanted to ordain. He went home, after the Buddha said, “You first have to get permission from your parents.” He asked for their permission and they wouldn’t give it. So he went on a hunger strike. And he was really determined, to the point where the parents were really afraid that he would die if he didn’t eat. They asked his friends to talk to him. He said, “No, either I die right here or I get to ordain.” And so the friends told the parents, “You’d be better off letting him ordain, because at least if he ordains, you get to see him again.” So the parents relented, gave their permission, and he went off to a far distant part of India, practiced, gained awakening, decided to come back home. There’s a long story about how his parents still wanted him to disrobe. So he left, went off to stay in the pleasure park of a king nearby. The king heard that this young man was there in the pleasure park. Back in those days they would have gardens and forests where kings could go and enjoy themselves with their harem in the forest. But that day there was no one there. The king heard the monk was there, and so went and asked him, “You were young, healthy, wealthy. Why did you ordain?” In the king’s eyes it was mainly people who were old and decrepit, who were sick, who had lost their relatives. Lost their wealth. Those are the ones who would ordain. But there was a young man, his name was Rathabala, who didn’t fit into those categories. Rathabala told him there were four Dhamma summaries taught by the Buddha that had inspired him to want to ordain. Then he went down to Vestha, which is China just now. The first Dhamma summary was, “The world is swept away, it does not endure.” The king asked him, “What does that mean?” Rathabala asked him in return, “When you were young, were you strong?” The king said, “Yes, I was so strong I felt I had supernormal powers. I could see no one else was as strong as I was.” “How about now?” “Oh no, I’m 80 years old. Sometimes I need to put my foot one place and it goes someplace else.” Rathabala said, “Well, that’s what I meant. The world is swept away.” It’s a teaching on aging and a teaching on the inconsistency of the fact that the things we have keep changing. But they don’t just change, they bring pain. That’s what the second Dhamma summary is all about. The world offers no shelter, there’s no one in charge. Of course, the king felt he was in charge of his kingdom. So he asked, “What do you mean by that?” Niyama asked him, “Do you have a recurring illness?” The king said, “Yes.” He said it was a wind illness, which basically means shooting pains going through his body. Sometimes my relatives and courtiers gather around as I’m lying there in pain, and they say, “Maybe he’ll die this time.” It almost sounds like they’re hoping for him to die. Here are the people that depend on him, and they’re waiting for him to die. So Rathabala says, “Even though you’re king, can you ask them to share out the pain so that you feel less?” The king says, “Oh no, I have to feel it all on my own.” That’s an area in which the king is not in charge. The pain is in charge. So that’s a teaching on illness and a teaching on pain. And third, the world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind. The king says, “Well, I’ve got lots of gold and silver. What do you mean the world has nothing of its own?” Rathabala asked him, “When you die, can you take it with you?” “I have to go and leave it all behind and go on in line with my karma.” Rathabala said, “That’s what that summary means. It’s not really your own. It’s a teaching on not-self. Things that you think are yours, you have to leave.” And finally, the world is in sufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving. The king, of course, didn’t like being called a slave. So he asked Rathabala, “What does this one mean?” Rathabala asked him, “Suppose there were a trustworthy person to come from the East and say there’s a kingdom to the East that’s wealthy, but with a very weak army. With your army you could conquer them. Would you try to conquer them?” The king said, “Yes, of course.” Now think about this. Here he’s been contemplating aging, illness, death. The fact that he’s old, has recurring illnesses and lots of pain. And whatever he gets in his life, he’s going to have to leave behind. And yet he still wants to go for more. It’s a sign of how blind our cravings are. The Rathabala continued, “How about if someone were to come to the West with the same news? Someone to come from the North or the South with the same news? Would you go from the kingdom to the West, the North and the South?” “Yes.” “How about if someone were to come from the other side of the ocean with the same sort of news? Would you go for that one too?” “Yes.” Total blindness. And this is the nature of the world. The things of the world are inconstant, stressful, not-self, marked with aging, illness and death. And yet we can’t imagine anything better, so keep coming back for more. The Buddha taught the young man to imagine that there was something more. To open that possibility in his mind, which is why he wanted to leave home. Left his wealth, left his family. And ended up finding that yes, there is something better, there is something more. There is a happiness that doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t age, doesn’t die. That’s what he had found. And this is what inspired him to leave home. If you were to take that news and contemplate it, there is something better than the run-of-the-mill happiness of the world. It requires training, it requires dedication. But whatever effort is made toward finding that happiness is all effort well spent. In some cases you have to give up your wealth to find it. But even if you don’t, you do have to devote what you’ve got. Make the best use of what you’ve got. You’ve got this body that ages, is going to grow ill and ultimately is going to die. What are you going to do with it? A lot of people make their bucket lists, saying I’d like to go here, see this, taste that, listen to this. But those things barely leave a trace. Think about the sensory pleasures you had last week. Where are they now? They’re just a memory. And if you gain them, eventually they’ll be just a memory. And John Foon used to like to say that the sensory pleasures that you really hope for, desire, dream of, are things that you’ve already had. This is why you want them, you’ve missed them. You had them before, now they’re gone. You want them back. What’s going to happen if you get them back? You’re going to lose them again, miss them again, want them again. There’s no stop to this, unless you decide to stop and devote yourself to something better. So this body we have that ages, grows ill, dies. Think of the goodness you can get out of it in the meantime. Like we’re meditating right now. We’re using the body, focused on the breath, as our object of meditation. Trying to feel the body, the entire body, from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes, as we’re grounding the mind. So even though the body does have its limitations, it does have its uses. It’s just that you have a good sense of what it’s genuine uses are. You can use the body to be generous. You can use it to observe the precepts, to learn to be virtuous, and to meditate. All of which are good things. There’s a story in Thailand, a true story, of a woman who came into a lot of tapes of Dhamma talks by Dhamma. She had gone with her friend, who had cancer, to stay for three months at a Dhamma boys monastery, and he gave a Dhamma talk for them every night, almost. So when they left, they had 80 some tapes, which first went to the woman with cancer. But then she died after six months, and the tapes went to the woman who had accompanied her. Now the woman who had accompanied her was over 80 years old. She wanted to transcribe the tapes, but she was afraid that she was too old and decrepit to do it. Her eyesight was bad, her health wasn’t all that good. So she mentioned this to a Jhana Mahabhava. He said, “Try to squeeze as much goodness as you can out of your body before you have to throw it away.” In other words, focus on the good things you can still do, even as you get older, even as you get sick, even as you die. There are good things you can do with your mind. You can develop your concentration, develop your discernment. At the very least, you can spread thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill is a wish for happiness. The Buddha calls it “a monk’s wealth.” In other words, when you become a monk, everything you have is somebody else’s gift. If you’ve been a monk for a couple years, every cell in your body is the result of somebody’s generosity, of the food that you’ve eaten, as the different cells get replaced. But one thing you do have that’s your own, and that’s the goodness you can generate from within your mind. So when you generate goodwill, it’s like having a pretty impressive your own. You can print as much money as you like. And unlike the money of the world, the value of your goodwill doesn’t decrease the more you create. In fact, the more you create, the more valuable it becomes. You want it to spread around. Of course, you don’t just think thoughts of goodwill. The Buddha says you act in goodwill and you speak in goodwill as well. This doesn’t mean you just do things that please other people. If you’re thinking of their true happiness, where is their true happiness going to come from? It’s going to come from their own actions. So if someone is unskillful in their behavior, your goodwill for them means, basically, may they see the error of their ways. May they learn the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them. If you don’t have goodwill for yourself, you have to have the same wish for yourself as well. So that doesn’t mean just may you be happy in whatever you’re doing. It means may you learn how to produce happiness. May you learn how to generate happiness through the way you think, act, speak. This is a thought you can have for anyone. It also means when you’re actually trying to help someone else be happy, you don’t just follow their wishes. The question is, how can you get that person to become skillful? And whatever you can do in that direction, that’s an expression of goodwill. Of course, you look around you and there are a lot of people in the world who are not going to be acting in skillful ways. For them, you have to have equanimity. Not because you don’t feel for them or have goodwill for them, simply because you realize if you focus on trying to change their ways and they resist, you’re wasting your energy that could be used someplace else. We all only have so much energy. So if they’ve wronged you, you forgive them. But if you want to have a reconciliation, that’s going to require a lot of energy on both sides. Sometimes it’s possible, sometimes it’s not. But you don’t try to pretend there’s been a reconciliation when there hasn’t been one. It’s interesting, when we think about the Buddha’s teachings, we think mainly about the Dhamma, which is full of all these good principles. But the Buddha also taught the Vinaya, which are the monk’s rules. And they’re his expression of how you apply those principles to the nitty-gritty of daily life. One of his principles is if there has been a split in the Sangha, the monastic order, you don’t just paper over it. You try to get to the root cause. It turns out that one side was really acting on very unskillful, devious motives. You’re not going to be able to have a reconciliation. And the Buddha doesn’t want you to force a reconciliation. When one side has been behaving poorly, they have to recognize that they behaved in an unskillful way, apologize, and promise not to do it again. Then you can have a reconciliation. So goodwill doesn’t mean that we have a Pali attitude toward life, that everybody has to be smiling and nice, regardless of what we really think. We really have to have genuine goodwill, and skillful motivations. And if we encounter someone whose motivations are not skillful and they refuse to change, you can forgive them, have goodwill, but you have to basically stay away from that person. Because you’re going to have goodwill for all beings. There are a lot of beings that you don’t want to get near, like snakes. You don’t want to get near a snake and pet it. You’re going to wish it well. But you also wish, maybe, to go someplace else. And if you don’t go someplace else, I’m going to go someplace else. We have to live our separate ways. So goodwill is not just sweet thoughts. You’re thinking seriously about happiness. And this is what the Buddhist teachings are all about, thinking seriously about happiness. Are you going to content yourself with happiness that comes and goes very quickly, that slips through your fingers, like trying to scoop up water in your hand and it slips through your fingers? Is that the kind of happiness you want? If you’re going to take some time, spend your energy to be happy, devote it to something that’s not going to change on you. Devote it to something that’s going to last. When you look for happiness in your relationships with other people, think carefully about what’s possible. What’s the best use of your time? Where you have to simply forgive others and where you can actually have a reconciliation if there’s been wrongdoing. So this is what it comes down to. Think seriously about your happiness. After all, it’s what we all want. And you would think that people would think seriously about what would actually make them happy. But so many people just look around and see somebody who’s kind of fleshy. They have wealth, they have power, they have beauty, and think they must be happy. But you talk to them, they’re not happy. Try to find good examples of people who are genuinely happy. Find out how they did it, or how they’re doing it. And this will involve giving up some things, because there are some forms of happiness that are in conflict with each other. So you go for the greater happiness and let go of the lesser happiness. It’s all common sense, but how much common sense do we have around our desire for happiness? Give it some thought.

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