The Noble Search

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There’s a verse in the Dhammapada where the Buddha says that if you see a greater happiness that comes from letting go of a lesser happiness, the wise person is willing to forsake the lesser happiness for the sake of the greater happiness. The word “greater” there can also be translated as “abundant.” Basic common sense. But most people in the world don’t follow that principle. Their happiness is whatever is easiest, whatever is quickest. That’s the happiness they go for. There are very few people who really take that principle seriously. That you should be willing to let go of a lesser happiness for the sake of a greater one. I have a friend who is an author. She also teaches at a university. Every time one of her new books would come out, she’d get invited around to the alumni clubs to read from her new book, which meant that she had to figure out one incident from the book that was a self-contained little story in one of her novels. It was about a young woman whose mother dies at the very beginning of the novel. It tells of her life after that. The father swears up and down that he’s going to remain faithful to his wife’s memory, do his best to stay home, not get remarried, look after the child. But things change. He’s sent down south. This is back in the 15th or 16th century. He gets sent south, comes back and has a new wife, a former courtesan. The new mother wants to be a good mother to the girl. One night they’re playing chess. This is the incident that my friend read from the book. The new mother is telling the young girl, “If you want to be happy, in life, you have to decide there’s one thing you want more than anything else. You’re going to be willing to sacrifice everything else for that one thing.” And the girl is listening, half listening, half not listening. But she’s beginning to notice that her new mother is a very sloppy chess player, losing pieces very quickly, right? All over the board. So the girl gets aggressive. It turns out that the new mother is planning a trap. She’s the one who wins the game. Of course, the way she plays chess is illustrating the point that she’s trying to make. You have to be willing to lose some of your pieces if you want to win. My friend said that she read this little story to two or three alumni clubs and had to stop. Nobody liked the message. Everyone wants to win at chess and keep all their pieces. But you don’t win that way. It involves a lot of trades. It’s the wise person who decides what happiness is most valuable and is willing to make sacrifices for that happiness. This is where we have the going forth, where we have the acceptance into the community of monks, the principle of renunciation. You’re not just giving up. You’re making a trade. You realize that there are a lot of lesser pleasures in life that are going to get in the way of the ultimate happiness. Or in the Buddhist terms, you realize there are many ignoble searches in life where you devote yourself to trying to find happiness, but they end up with a happiness that’s subject to aging, illness, and death. Inconstant, stressful, not-self. But there is a noble search which leads to something that doesn’t die. And it’s worth the sacrifice. It’s the sacrifices that are made for it. As the Buddha once said, if you could make a deal that you’d be willing to be stabbed by a hundred spears in the morning, a hundred spears at noon, a hundred spears in the evening, every day for a hundred years, three hundred spears per day, with the guarantee that you would gain awakening at the end of a hundred years, he said it would be a good deal. And not only that, when you finally attain awakening, you wouldn’t feel that you had gained it through pain. The goal, the practice, the deathless, is that amazing, is that abundant happiness. So keep that point in mind. That’s what we’re here for. This is why we have the monastic community, so that people can devote their lives fully to that goal. And make as few compromises with other pleasures as possible. We follow the rules. We follow the customs of the monastic order. The chanting, wearing the robes, not because we think it’s a lovely custom, but because somehow we think that’s a nice way to live. It’s a necessary way to live if you want to have as few obstacles to the goal as possible. Every aspect of the training is aimed at peeling away the obstacles to the noble search. Which is why, as you’ll notice tomorrow when we have the ordination, a lot of people will be coming to express their admiration for those who are going to redain. Because it’s either doing something noble, and there’s so little nobility in our lives these days. Modern society seems to be based on greed, greed, greed. Acquiring, acquiring, acquiring. And be willing to grub for whatever you can get. But the Buddha says there is a better happiness, a more abundant happiness. And it can be attained through our efforts. That’s why he set forth the Four Noble Truths. To give us a sense of where it is that we’re causing ourselves suffering. What that suffering is, how we can attack the problem at the cause. And there’s a path of practice. He lays out the Noble Eightfold Path. He also lays out the duties with regard to the Four Noble Truths. We chanted the discourse on setting the Wheel of Dharma in motion just now. And some people sometimes ask, “Where is the wheel?” Well, it turns out a wheel in the Buddhist times was like what we’d call a table nowadays. You have a set of variables on one side of the table, another set on the other side, and each of the boxes in the table shows what happens when you combine the different variables. In those days they called it a wheel. You’d have different variables and then you would go down all the possible combinations. And you would imagine like a wheel around you. That’s the wheel. So the point where the Buddha says that he saw what each Noble Truth was, what the duty was with regard to that Noble Truth, and the fact that he had finished that duty. Three levels of knowledge, Four Noble Truths, Twelve permutations. That’s the wheel. But the wheel also in the Buddhist times was a symbol of power. They said that a king had his wheel of his kingdom. So the Buddha had his wheel of power. In other words, he became the ultimate teacher, because he taught the ultimate happiness. There’s nothing anywhere that can compare. And this is the way we get there. All of his truths are truths that have duties. Now he’s not forcing the duties on you. You take them on voluntarily, because you see that he’s right when he says that if this is what you want, this is what you have to do. So what you want is a Noble Happiness, one that causes no harm to anybody. And it’s not going to die on you. That’s why we have this training. So it’s a Noble Path, the response to a Noble Desire, and it leads to a Noble Goal. As the Buddha said, it’s admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end, admirable in the basic motivation, admirable in all the various steps that are required on the path, and admirable in the goal that it leads to. As one of the Buddha’s disciples was contemplating one time, this is a path for people who are modest in terms of trying to impress other people. We’re not doing this to impress anybody. Contend with the material things. Again, we look forward to seclusion, being willing to go off and straighten out their own minds, who are persistent, who are willing to put forth effort, mindful, develop their powers of concentration, develop their discernment. And this disciple, Venerable Aniruddha, mentioned this to the Buddha, and the Buddha added one more quality. Someone who delights in non-objectification. What that means is you don’t turn yourself into an object in a world where there’s going to be beings or other beings that are going to have to conflict for the same food that you’re looking for. You’re looking for a goal that has no conflict at all, and you’re happy to deal with your own mind on a level where you’re not trying to define who you are, but rather trying to see what exactly is going on in the mind that’s causing suffering, looking at it in impersonal terms, but also intimate terms. And the Buddha talks about events in the mind in an impersonal way. He’s not talking about abstractions. He’s talking about specific events that are even more intimate to you than your sense of who you are. So you’re willing to look at your mind simply as events coming and going, and which ones cause what. And then you get the mind into concentration, and you’re looking at the mind right at that level. Here’s just awareness, breath, any reference to you as a meditator. You want to put that aside to see what are the things that make concentration happen, what are the things that make concentration last. You look at it purely as events like that. And you’re not laying claim to anything outside that anyone else would want. You’re dealing with your problem that comes from how you sense your mind from within, how you sense your body from within. Totally your territory. And this is where you’re going to settle in, and this is where you’re going to find your victory. So this is the kind of person you want to be. As the Buddha said, he looked for someone who was honest and observant. He wanted that person to straighten out his desires. In other words, figure out which desires are most important, which ones are of lesser importance, and hold to that sense of the desires that are really more important. Let those be paramount. You want to be determined. Determined on discernment. Determined on truth. Determined on relinquishment, the things you have to let go in order to find the ultimate truth. Determined on calm. Realizing that there is no true happiness other than peace. This is what we’re working for. We use our honesty, we use our powers of observation to help them through the path. And this is where they will lead us.

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