In Training

July 1, 2024

In the instructions given to a new monk, there’s one theme that’s stressed over and over again, and that’s that the Buddha’s teaching is a training. It’s a how-to teaching. The Buddha doesn’t give too much information about the universe out there. In fact, this is one of the ways in which his teaching was very different from the teachings that were being taught at the time. There’s a story of a king who goes to different teachers and asks them, “What is the fruit of the contemplative life, this path that you’ve taken on? What good does it do?” And the teachers, instead of answering his question, just give a canned version of their account of what the universe is like. And usually it comes down to the fact that human action plays no role in the working out of the universe. It’s just elements interacting, or forces coming in from the past, giving you no room for your choices, no room for making a difference. And you just have to accept that fact, and then do whatever you want. And as the king later told the Buddha, it was as if he had asked about a jackfruit and they’d answered with a mango. Or if he’d asked about a mango and they’d answered with a jackfruit. In other words, there was no fruit of a contemplative life that he could figure out from what they had to say. When he came to the Buddha, the Buddha gave him a very detailed account of what the training of a monk was like, starting with the precepts. It goes into a lot of detail. In fact, some of the details are not even in the Vinaya. Right action, right speech, right livelihood. Training in contentment, training in mindfulness, training in concentration, training in the skills that come from concentration, and finally release. That’s the fruit of the contemplative life. That’s the highest of the fruits. As for the universe out there, the Buddha has almost nothing to say in that sutta. And in other suttas where he talks about it, he gives just a sketch. He never gives a full account of the different levels of being. He just indicates that there are different levels, and they all come from your actions. That’s the point he focuses on a lot. So your skillful actions based on skillful intentions are going to lead to good consequences. Unskillful actions based on unskillful intentions will lead to bad consequences. It’s a simple-sounding principle. It gets pretty complex, especially since there are times when an unskillful action will give pleasant results in the immediate present, even though the fact of acting on greed, aversion, and delusion is not in and of itself pleasant. But it can lead to other sensual pleasures, other kinds of pleasures that last for at least a little while. The same with skillful actions. Sometimes they’re difficult. The fact that you’re acting on a skillful intention is pleasant in and of itself. It feels good not to be giving into greed, aversion, and delusion. But it may be hard. That’s why there’s so much confusion about what your actions are, what their powers are. So here the Buddha says he wants to teach you right view. He can’t teach you knowledge about karma. Knowledge about karma comes later, when you actually practice the skills of the training. But he can give you right view. In other words, something you take on conviction, because it makes sense. You don’t know for sure that it’s true. But you know that if you take it on as your working hypothesis, you’re going to act in ways that you feel good about. So you take it on. And then everything else comes from there. The Four Noble Truths come down to basically what kind of karma leads to suffering and what kind of karma leads to the end of suffering. More detailed instructions like dependent co-arising. Place a lot of emphasis on the factors that occur prior to your sensory contact. In other words, it’s not just the case that you see something nice and it gives rise to greed. Or you hear something you don’t like and it gives rise to anger. Sometimes the mind is primed. It’s looking for something to get lustful about. It’s looking for something to get angry about. And it’ll latch on anything. And so you dig around into what those factors are prior to sensory contact and you find that intention plays a big role. So the teaching is all about action. And how to train your actions so that they lead to a true happiness. Happiness that doesn’t disappoint. Happiness that doesn’t change. So that’s what we should focus on. Getting trained. In other words, training implies discipline. In fact, that’s what the monks’ rules are called. Vinaya. It means disciplining. And there’s a part of the mind that rebels. I’d like to have some freedom. Well, what kind of freedom are you looking for? The freedom just to do what you want since you’re a slave to craving as we chant again and again and again. And it’s good not to see discipline as something being imposed from outside. It’s something you take on voluntarily. And what it means is you sort through your desires. And you decide that some desires are more worth listening to, more worth following than others. And you don’t analyze them just as an idle pastime. You decide that you’re going to make those desires paramount. And they’re going to be willing to give up everything else, all your other desires, for the sake of the ones that are really important. So when you run into the rules, don’t think of them as being imposed from outside. Think of them as being channels for freedom. Because freedom from your desires means that you’ve reached a point where you don’t need to desire anything anymore. Imagine what that’s like. The Jhans talk about the pleasures of Nibbana, how amazing it is. And Jhan Mahaprabhu has a comment. He said if he could take Nibbana out and show it to other people, nobody would want any thing else. So you’re looking for that kind of freedom. You’re training for that kind of freedom. That means you’re following that whole principle that if there’s a more abundant happiness that comes from forsaking a lesser happiness, you’re willing to forsake the lesser happiness for the sake of the abundant one. It’s not a strange or exotic principle. It’s very commonsensical. But how many people live their lives in a commonsensical way? The life of a monk is designed to help you devote all your time to that pursuit of the more abundant happiness. And for those who can’t take on the life of a monk, to whatever extent you do devote yourself to the training, it’s all for the good. So it’s a matter of sorting through your desires. The Buddha teaches dispassion as the ultimate Dhamma. And Venerable Sariputta said the teaching was all about the subduing of desire and passion. That doesn’t mean that the Buddha tells you not to desire anything at all from the get-go. It means thinking very carefully about desire, desires, and getting both your heart and your mind acting together. Because your heart wants true happiness. But it also tends to want every kind of pleasure imaginable. You have to use your head here to remind yourself that some pleasure get in the way of others. It’s like planting a garden. If you want all kinds of flowers, all kinds of trees, there are some trees that can poison and kill other trees. You plant a eucalyptus tree or a couple pine trees and they kill everything else. You’ve got to decide if you want things that are nicer, you’ve got to keep the eucalyptus out, you’ve got to keep the pine trees out. It’s a matter of sorting through and figuring out which plants really are worthwhile. And it’s the same in the mind. There are a lot of things that you could want and you’re going to find that it’s going to get frustrating sometimes. Old desires come out of nowhere and you have to learn how to wrestle them down. That’s why one of the topics in the precepts the preceptor teaches is the first five of the parts of the body that we chant about. Hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin. To remind yourself that whatever you might lust for is basically that. And if you took them apart piece by piece by piece, what would there be to lust for? So why is it that the body, why is it that the mind wants to put them back together again? Dress them up in a way that’s really contrary to their nature. This is a lot of what the teaching is about, is taking your desires that are unskillful and taking them apart. What the Buddha teaches is impersonal teachings, where he doesn’t talk about a person doing X in a particular place, but he talks about different events in the mind influencing other events in the mind. It’s basically so you can step back from them and say, “I thought I was doing this. And as long as I felt that it was me doing it, I was going to do it. I was going to stick with it.” If you can just see it as an event, if you can see that it’s not worth it, that’s a lot of what the teaching on non-self is. It’s a value judgment. When you can step back from something and say, “I have the choice of identifying with this or not. And if I identify with it, it’s going to be so-and-so.” “I’m suffering. It’s going to be stressful. It’s going to lead me to do all kinds of unskillful things. Why take it on?” So again, you’re sorting through your desires and choosing the ones that you think will be more lasting, give better results, based not only on your own perceptions, but also on what you’ve learned from those you respect. That’s what the training is all about. So when you come to practice the Dhamma, think of yourself as being in training. All the teachings we learn, even the abstract, seeming ones, are there to help with the training. They’re part of the “how to” that the Buddha taught. So see them from that angle, and then you’ll be best prepared to apply them in the most effective way.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/240701_In_Training.mp3>