Living in the Buddha’s World

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Most of the descriptions of dependent co-arising stop with suffering, aging, illness, death, pain, limitation, grief, distress, and despair. But there’s one that goes beyond, talks about the factors that lead to suffering, and then from there you go to conviction. In other words, you realize that you’re suffering, and you need to find a way out. And then you see that the Buddha offers a way out. Conviction here specifically means conviction in his awakening, that what he awakened to was true. And he did put an end to suffering through his own actions. And he did it in such a way that he could teach it to others. He could follow the same path, and put an end to their sufferings as well. So when you’ve decided you’ve had enough suffering, and you want a way out, and you find this way out, there’s a joy that goes with that. Because what does the Buddha’s awakening mean? He awakened to the Four Noble Truths, and the Four Noble Truths took him beyond total finding. The Four Noble Truths are a statement of fact about how things are caused in the world. They’re also a statement of values. The facts have to do with the principles of causality. When you live in the world of the Buddha’s awakening, the world as he saw it, and you take on that world as the world in which you say you’re going to be operating, the basic assumption is that you do have freedom of choice, and your choices can make a difference. We’re not trapped in some evil god’s plan for giving eternal bliss for some people, and condemning others to eternal damnation, and having planned beforehand who’s going to go where, which means that nothing you can do can make a difference. That’s the world in which a lot of people live. It’s a pretty visible world. The Buddha, though, said what we experience in the present moment is a combination of three things. The results of past actions, our current actions, and the results of our current actions. And our current actions are not determined by our past actions. Some people think that that’s his teaching on karma, but it’s not. In fact, it’s a teaching that he opposed so strongly that he actually sought out people who taught that and argued with them. He wasn’t the sort of person to go and pick fights in general, but that was one fight that he picked. The message being that you do have a choice in the present moment, and your present moment actions can make a difference right now. And those choices are not determined by the past. You have this element of freedom. So that thought right there is a source of joy. We’re not stuck in some system that’s beyond our power to change. We can learn from our actions. We get some counsel and some advice from the Buddha as to what actions are skillful and which ones are not. And this too is a source for joy. We don’t have to keep reinventing the dharma wheel all the time. But he also gives us the basic principles for learning how to look at our actions, look at our intentions, anticipate the results. And if you anticipate anything unskillful, you don’t do it. If you anticipate any harm, you don’t do the action. While you’re doing the action, you check for the results. When the action is done, you check for the results. And if you see that you caused harm in any way, you learn from that. This is what mindfulness is all about. You learn these lessons and you don’t want to forget them. But the Buddha’s pointing to the fact that you don’t simply follow his instructions. You learn how to develop your own powers of observation. That too is a source for joy. So that’s what he teaches about causality. The other thing that the Four Noble Truths teach is a system of values. What actions are worth doing and which ones are not. I’ve heard quite a few people say that the Four Noble Truths are not a value judgment. They’re not saying that anything is bad. That it’s just the way the world is. But you look at the duties that go with those Four Noble Truths. And they very definitely are based on a system of values. Which things are worth comprehending, which things are worth abandoning. That’s a value judgment right there. You let go of your cravings, which is accompanied by delight and passion. And you develop the path to the end of suffering. Again, the path is something good. So there’s a value judgment inherent. And you take on the Buddha’s values. He’s saying your suffering is the most important issue in the world. He’s not the sort of person who would sacrifice you to some larger purpose. You’re responsible for your sufferings, but you can do something about them. Some people don’t like being held responsible. They just want to trust in some outside power doing all the work for them. But the Buddha doesn’t encourage that attitude. He says it’s heedless. He says you have to be your own mainstay. Who else can you depend on? You look at yourself right now and you say, well, I can’t depend on myself very much. But he’s saying, well, you can change. You change by what you do. If you start doing different things, you become a different person. It takes time. Sometimes it’s frustrating. And the Buddha acknowledges that there is an element of pain there. He calls it renunciate pain. Realizing that there are those who have gone all the way to the goal, but you’re not there yet. And you look at it and sometimes it seems like it’s a long, long journey. The image that comes to my mind is of that canyon that’s on the planet of Mars. It’s supposed to be the biggest canyon in the solar system. You can imagine how difficult, say, the Grand Canyon is here on Earth just to go down there. Well, imagine the canyon on Mars is pretty difficult. But still, the fact that there is hope at the end of the path gives you hope all along the way. Because if there were no goal, what would life be like? What would the world be like then? There’d be no escape from the things we see, the things we hear, the things we sense around us, the people we see, the misbehavior we see, all the aging, illness, and death and suffering. There’d be no escape from that. That would be a miserable world to live in. So even though there’s pain in the realization that you haven’t reached the goal, there’s also joy in the fact that there is a goal. And you reflect on all the people who’ve tread the path. They’ve had to give up a lot of their attitudes, change a lot of their ways, but they realize that the trade is worth it. Think of that story with John Lee. There was an agreement. He was going to go on a Tudung trip with some of his lay students. They were going to meet at the major railroad station in Bangkok, U Lom Pong. And a couple of monks went along as well. John Foon was one. He was the one who told me the story. And he knew what it was like to travel with John Lee. So let’s say he packed lightly. He had just one bag over his shoulder with his bowl, and a few robes, and a few other necessities, and that was it. But the lay people came with lots of luggage. They figured they could get porters to carry the luggage, put it on the train, and then when they got to the destination, have porters carry it from the train into the forest. Well, John Lee saw all that luggage and said, “Instead of getting on the train, you should start walking down the track.” So then John walks down the track. Everybody has to walk down the track. So people were struggling with all that luggage, and they started complaining. And at first he didn’t say anything. And finally he said, “Well, if it’s heavy, throw it away.” So they realized that he meant business. So they stopped, repacked their bags, packed all the necessities into one bag apiece. And everything else got thrown into the lotus ponds that lined the railroad track of those days going in and out of the train station. By the time they got to the next train station, everybody’s load was a lot lighter. So then he allowed everybody to get on the next train. That’s the attitude you’ve got to have. There are going to be things you’ve got to let go. But if you have conviction in the Buddha, you’re convinced, there’s what’s worth letting go, what’s worth keeping. And you’re willing to change. So you live in a world where change is possible, and there’s change for the better. Otherwise you live in a world where the only change is whatever you gain, you’re going to have to lose to aging, illness, and death, over and over and over again. Either that or you may believe, “Well, this is it. This is the one lifetime.” So you do well for a while, and then aging cuts in. Illness cuts in. Death cuts everything off, and that’s it. You wonder, “What’s that all about?” But if you live in the Buddhist world, there’s hope. And it’s a source for joy. So you can bring that sense of joy to the practice, even more when you’ve actually been following his teachings. So I’ve noticed that people who come to meditation straight off the street, without any background in generosity, without any background in virtue, without understanding it, generosity and virtue, in line with how the Buddha taught it, tend to be pretty grim in their meditation. But if you had the experience of learning that the Buddha is right, when you give, there’s a sense of lightness that comes in, a more expansive mind state. When you’re virtuous, there’s more of a greater sense of self-esteem. You’ve got some joy, not only from the thought of the Buddhist world, but actually from the activities that the Buddha recommended. And that can sustain you. That can give you the basis you need for your concentration to deal with the ups and downs, and not get discouraged by the downs, and not get so hyper about the ups. This is one of our problems. When things go up, we try to latch on to the things that go up. And then they just melt between our fingers. But you have confidence that this is going in the right direction. When the ups come, you learn from them. When the downs come, you learn from them. And that can be a source of joy. So when things start getting dry, or frustrating, reflect on the fact that you’re in the Buddha’s world. And in the Buddha’s world, you have power. And in the Buddha’s world, you have hope. You live in a world where a light has been brought into the darkness. Things that have been overturned are bright. Even though the goal is to go beyond this world, as long as you’re in a world, this is a good one to be in.

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