Four Truths as Context

July 19, 2024

What we chanted just now was the Buddha’s first sermon. He delivered it to the five brethren. It was about the four noble truths. Several days later, he gave them another sermon on not-self, or inconstancy, stress, and not-self. And it’s good to remember that they came in that order. The four noble truths, the Eightfold Path, provide the framework. And it’s then within that framework that we think about the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. Because the framework provided by the four noble truths has some duties. That’s what the wheel in the Dhamma Wheel is about. It goes through each of the truths, and then three levels of knowledge about each of the truths. What the truth is, what the duty is, and then knowing that the duty has been completed. Three times four is twelve. That’s why the Dhamma Wheel has twelve spokes. And it’s within the context of those duties that you apply the three perceptions. So the first noble truth is that suffering is supposed to be comprehended. And comprehending means understanding it to the point of having no passion, no aversion, no delusion around it. So we have passion for the five aggregates, and we end that passion by seeing that they’re inconstant, stressful, and not-self. The second noble truth is craving, which is the cause of suffering. So we come to the five aggregates and see that they’re not worth the craving. Because the duty there is to abandon the craving. So the perceptions have their role in the context of those duties. If you get the context backwards, you get into a lot of trouble. And a lot of people do that. They say we have to accept the fact that the world is impermanent, stressful, not-self. But you can do almost anything with those perceptions. And some people do. Some people say, well, because our pleasures are fleeting, we should grab them while we can. The old songs, eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die. That’s the attitude. And a moderate attitude, a moderated version of that attitude is, well, life is like a dance where you’re constantly changing partners. So you cling to one partner for a while, knowing that you’re going to have to let go. But then there’ll be another one, then another one. The most extreme versions of those teachings take the teaching on not-self to mean there is no self. There’s nobody there to do anything. You have no free will. There’s no agency. So you just accept, accept, accept. That’s a miserable teaching. It’s really not what the Buddha taught. His whole point of putting the three characteristics of the three perceptions in the context of the Four Noble Truths is to say there are things you can do. After all, there are those duties to comprehend suffering, to abandon its cause, to realize its cessation, and to develop the path to its cessation. The Four Noble Truths shows you that you have a choice. You can either keep on doing the things that are causing suffering, or you can do things that lead to the end of suffering. So you have choice. You have the power of making a difference in your life. As the Buddha said, if people couldn’t abandon unskillful qualities they had and develop skillful qualities they didn’t already have, he wouldn’t have bothered to teach because there wouldn’t have been anything accomplished by teaching. But it’s because you can change your habits if they’re unskillful. That’s why he taught. So keep that in mind. We’re going through a summer right now. A heat wave is coming on. And tempers tend to get frayed. So your attitude should be, “Well, other people may be getting frayed, but I’m not going to get frayed.” So you develop factors of the path inside you to give yourself some strength, to give you focus on how hot it is, and how stupid the other people are around you, and how nobody does anything right. That just pulls you down. But you have the choice to look in another way. You’re here to have the opportunity to do some good. Part of the good, of course, is the meditation, and we always like to see the meditation go well. And there’s a sense that the work we do around the monastery gets in the way of our practice. But it’s an important part of the practice. We’re not here just to meditate. We’re here to develop other good qualities of the mind, and one of them is generosity. Generosity doesn’t mean just giving material things. You give of your time, you give of your energy. And in giving you gain. All throughout the Buddhist teachings, that’s the basic message, is that you give, but you get something better in return. And if you spend a lot of time just meditating, but your interaction with other people is unskillful, it shows something’s wrong with your meditation. It’s not complete. There is that tendency, especially when you have meditation centers and meditation retreats, to regard the practice of meditation as the whole of the practice. But the Buddha never taught in that way. He taught a triple training, virtue, concentration, discernment, all based on generosity. All that is part of the path. So you have the choice. You can follow that path which leads to the end of suffering. There may involve some exertion in the meantime. And exertion comes hard when it’s hot. But look inside you. There are resources. If you don’t look for them, you’re not going to see them. If you look for them, you’ll find them. One of your most important resources is learning how to talk to yourself, so you’re not creating more and more burdens for yourself and spreading them from you to the people around you. So learn to talk to yourself in a skillful way. One time, when John Fung was leading a group of people up to sit and meditate at the jetty, they found that somebody had been up there and just left a lot of garbage. So instead of meditating, John Fung said, “Well, let’s clean up the garbage.” And one of the women started complaining. “How can anybody do that, throw garbage around in a jetty?” He said, “Don’t complain. They gave you the opportunity to make merit. This may not be the merit you wanted, but this is the merit, obviously, you’ve got to learn how to develop.” So your opportunities for helping around here are there for you to develop merit. And if not, everybody’s pulling their fair share. There’s merit that comes from carrying more than your share and learning how to delight in that. So we talked about the four noble truths, the three characteristics, and it sounds very far away. It’s right here under our noses. You’re holding on to certain attitudes that you want things to be done a certain way or not being done that way. It’s an opportunity to understand how you’re causing yourself suffering. When you think about the larger context, it makes it a lot easier to figure out what you should be doing. So this is one of the important aspects of learning about the Dhamma, is learning about context, and learning how to apply the context, not only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, trying to gather the mind around the breath, but when you’re dealing with whatever else comes up. And if you’re dealing with people who are not up to your standards, well, you have to remember there was a time in the past when you were not up to somebody else’s standards. Probably not just one time, many times. And this way that larger context can help you become more mature in your attitude and find sources of strength inside. Strengths that you can use to make a difference, so that instead of creating suffering for yourself and for the people around you as it spills out, you learn how to drop that. Get yourself back on the path. Because that’s the whole point of the Four Noble Truths. They are a duality. There’s the unskillful cause and the unpleasant result. There’s the skillful cause and the pleasant result. And you’re free to choose. If you were living in a world where you had no choice, we just have to accept that everything is inconstant, stressful, not self. Put up with it. And be a miserable world. Some people like a world where they have no choice because then they have no responsibility. Nobody can hold them accountable. But if you want freedom, if you want happiness, you have to be accountable. And being accountable is not all that bad. You learn to be mature. You find opportunities that you didn’t suspect before. Opportunities for not suffering. So look for them. They’re there.

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