Independent of the World

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There’s a romantic idea that’s made its way into Buddhist circles, that the root of all evil is the sense of a separate, independent self. That somehow if we learn to appreciate our interconnections, we’ll treat one another well. But just because we’re interconnected doesn’t mean we’ll have compassion for one another. Interconnection can also include oppression, people abusing one another. And you look at the world outside, there are a lot of things in the world you really don’t want to be connected to. The Buddha actually said that the essence of discernment is to see things as separate. And an important thing is to have a sense of your own separate, independent goodness. Your own determination that regardless of what the world is like, you’re going to do what’s skillful. Which means you can’t let your goodness depend on the world. Think of the Buddhist instructions for how to deal with other people who are doing things that are unskillful. On the one hand, you look for what they’re doing that is skillful. And you focus on that. For what reason? To make it easier to treat them well. If you find someone who has no good qualities at all that you can find, then the Buddha says, think of them as a person you find lying on the side of the road in a desert. Sick, thirsty, hungry. And no matter who that person is, no matter what their background, you have to feel sorry for them. So again, you learn how to think in a way that maintains your own independent goodness. Think of the Buddha himself. Who told him to become Buddha? It was his own aspiration. It was his own independent decision that that’s what he wanted to do. And he kept on developing his perfections regardless of what was going on around him, no matter how difficult it was, no matter how much other people tried to discourage him, he was able to maintain his determination. It’s as if we live in this world of ours, where everywhere you look they’re planning war. Everywhere you look they’re saying that health care and all the other services that we used to provide to people are a luxury. People’s attitudes toward gratitude, people’s attitudes toward goodness in general, put goodness in quotes. He realized if you want to survive, if you want your goodness to survive in this world, you have to have an independent source inside. This is why we take refuge. We have the example of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. And the word refuge, sarana, means not only something you take refuge in, but something you remember, something you keep in mind. This is one of the lessons of your inner teacher. You keep in mind the perspective of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. That it is possible to live in this world in a way that is wise and compassionate and pure. And it comes from being wise, compassionate, and pure in your pursuit of happiness. Realizing you’re going to have to depend on yourself in a lot of ways. We have their example. But what is their example? Their example is that you have to find inner resources. And you have them. They can be developed. The Buddha was not the sort of person to discourage you and tell you that you can’t do things on your own. As he said, if it were not possible for people to develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones, he wouldn’t teach to develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones. But it’s because we can do it. That’s why he taught. I think of the verbs that Canon uses to describe his style of teaching. There was informing, but there was also exhorting. There was instructing, but there was also rousing, urging, and encouraging. Basically telling you, this is what you can do to be skillful, and you can do it. So try to develop your fighting spirit and learn to cultivate it from within. And John Foong used to like to say, there’s nobody who’s hired us to practice. So it’s up to us to decide that this is what we want to do. And we maintain the determination to stick with it. Because we have lots of desires that go in all kinds of conflicting directions. And we need some overriding desires. The desire for discernment, the desire for truth, the desire for relinquishment. In other words, letting go. Whatever is holding us back. And the desire for calm. Nibbana is supposed to embody those four qualities. The discernment that frees you from your defilements is the highest noble discernment. Nibbana itself, which is totally undeceptive, is the highest noble truth. The discernment that allows you to let go of your greed, aversion, and delusion. This is the highest form of relinquishment. Of course, the calm, the satisfaction, that sense of peace and security that comes with attaining Nibbana is the highest noble calm. So we desire these things. And in desiring, we don’t just wait for them to come at the end of the path. We try to cultivate these qualities as part of our practice. The discernment that looks at things in the long term. That’s one of the things your teacher, your inner teacher, has to teach you. That whatever you’re going to do or say or think, you’ve got to stop and think. What are the long-term consequences of this going to be? And whether you like to do something or don’t like to do something is not the issue. The issue is will this lead to long-term welfare and happiness or long-term harm? That’s something you have to keep in mind all the time. This is why we work on mindfulness, the ability to remember things that are invaluable. Because it’s so easy in this world of short-term gains, short-term short-sighted goals, that we have to keep remembering the long term. Remember that also for the Buddha, the long term is quite long. I was listening to a quote-unquote Dharma teacher the other day saying that there are lots of ways that you can abuse the teaching on rebirth. There are lots of ways you can abuse it. There are many more ways you can abuse the teaching that there is no rebirth. It’s very easy to say, “Well, I’ll just do what I can to get by. I’m going to die anyhow. So I’ll grab what I can to get by.” There’s a lot of that in the world. The world is very short-sighted. You have to be long-sighted. As for truth, make it a point of honor that you have good values and you’re going to stick with them no matter what, no matter what the temptation is. Relinquishment. We live in a world where they say whoever dies with the most toys wins. Well, what do you win? As you accumulate, pile things up, what qualities of mind are you developing? The mind is a lot stronger when it doesn’t have to depend on things outside being a certain way. That means learning to let go of the things that are not necessary. The lighter you are inside, the better off you are. Think of Padia, the former king, sitting under a tree now that he was a monk, saying, “What bliss! What bliss!” The other monks were concerned. Maybe he was thinking back of his days as a king, so they went to see the Buddha. I’m sure the Buddha knew what Padia was thinking. He wanted to give him a chance to say it out loud in front of the community. So he called him in and said, “What are you thinking when you say, ‘Oh, bliss! What bliss!’” Padia was saying, “Back when I was a king, with all the wealth and power I had, still I couldn’t sleep at night even though I had guards inside the palace and out, inside the capital city and out, inside the countryside and out. I couldn’t sleep comfortably at night. And now I live off gifts from other people, what other people voluntarily give. And my mind is free like a wild deer.” So learn to see that relinquishment is a good thing. Giving up is a good thing. And finally, calm. As the Buddha said, “There really is no other happiness other than peace.” Of course, he’s talking about the happiness of the mind, the peace of the mind. When you find something that doesn’t change, that doesn’t disappoint, that’s not going to let you down, that’s when the mind can finally let go, put down its efforts, and simply enjoy the reward. So you can see these determinations. Don’t necessarily go with the values of the world. The sermon looks for the long-term consequences, and sees the long-term consequences being defined by the quality of your intentions, the intentions that you act on. The world goes for the short-term, the quick fix. As for truthfulness, well, look around. How much truthfulness you’re going to find in the media, how much truthfulness you’re going to find in most of our institutions, there’s very little. People who do good are criticized. People who do all sorts of bad things are praised. As for relinquishment, their attitude is, “The more you gain, the better.” As the Buddha says, “The more you’re able to let go, the better.” And they’re certainly not interested in calm. So you’re going to have to develop some values that go against the values of the world. This is what your inner teacher has to keep reminding you. So try to develop that voice inside. Listen to the Dhamma, thinking about the Dhamma, putting the Dhamma into practice. That’s how your teacher gets trained, particularly in putting the Dhamma into practice. Because you can think about the Dhamma and listen to it, and if it doesn’t show its benefits in your life, it’s just going to be words. And John Lee compares it to a recipe for medicine. It’s written on a little piece of paper, and if you haven’t actually tried the medicine, to see what disease it can cure, it just becomes an old scrap of paper. It’s very easy to throw away. But if you’ve tried the medicine, learned that it works, you’re going to treasure that little piece of paper. Make sure it doesn’t get lost. So strengthen your mindfulness, your inner teacher, through the practice of alertness, ardency, trying to do what’s skillful, and then keeping in mind the lessons you’ve learned. Realizing that the values of the world are one thing, but the values that lead to your true well-being are something totally other. And you have to develop them independently. There are people who will help, but you’re the one who has to do the work. And for all of us, as we do the work, when we meet with the results, they’re entirely inward, entirely personal, in a place where no one else can touch, which is why they’re secure. So a strong independent self, a wise independent self, and that’s how you survive.

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