Choose Your Path Wisely (outdoors)

July 26, 2018

The chant we recited just now, setting the wheel of Dharma in motion, was the Buddha’s first sermon. He gave it on a night like this, full moon night in July. And even though it was over 2,600 years ago, the message hits home right in our heart. The suffering that we cause ourselves. After his awakening, the Buddha could have talked about what a great awakening he had. But he actually wanted to do something useful. He does describe his awakening partly in the sutta. But he describes it with reference to a problem that everybody has, whether you’re Indian, Thai, American, European, whatever, Israeli. And it’s a problem that’s very personal. It’s the problem of suffering. Right here, right now. So understand the Dharma. It’s not necessary to go back and look at the old texts and think about 2,600 years ago. You just want to focus on what you’re doing right here, right now. But to see that first, you’ve got to get the mind really quiet. Choose a topic you like. It could be the breath. You could repeat “Buddho” to yourself. You can think about the different parts of the body. Something to get you anchored right here, right now. And do your best to drop away everything else, even your thoughts about who you are and where you are right now. Any thought that goes through the mind that you can recognize, “Oh, that’s a thought by me in the year 2018, here at work. But what made that?” Just let those thoughts go. You want to get down to just awareness of breath, awareness of body, awareness of the feelings, pleasure and pain, neither pleasure nor pain, that come about related to the breath. Try to bring all these together. Body, feelings, mind. So you can be sitting at the same place the Buddha was sitting on the night of his awakening. Not under the tree in India, of course, but he was right here at his breath. As he described it, the breath energy filled the body. A sense of ease and well-being filled the body. His awareness filled the body. And it was with those basic building blocks that he was able to achieve awakening. Notice he stripped everything down. Earlier on the night of his awakening, he had gotten memories of all his many past lifetimes, going back thousands and thousands of eons. But he didn’t let that clutter up his mind. He took a lesson from it, that this process of birth, aging, illness and death doesn’t end with death. It keeps on going again and again and again. Then he had that second knowledge, how it went on in line with your actions. He saw all beings in the universe dying and being reborn in line with their actions. So he stripped away all those details and he focused on action, intention, attention in the present moment. That’s how he gained awakening, by stripping things down, trying to keep things as simple as possible. So any thoughts that get in the way of getting things really simple here with the breath, just let them go, let them go. Because you want to catch the mind in the act. And it’s hard to catch it when it’s got lots of things to hide behind. Your thoughts about your identity, your thoughts about your likes and dislikes, and the world out there, what someone else did today or did last year. The act of the mind actually creating suffering for itself hides behind those things. It’s only when things are stripped away that you can see things clearly. So you have just body, feelings, mind. And then you bring those Four Noble Truths to bear on what you’ve got going on in body, feelings, and mind. The first truth is that there is suffering here, there’s stress, and it’s in clinging. In some cases, the Buddha defines clinging as taking delight and passion in things, or in others it’s just simply passion and desire. But the word clinging can also mean to feed. What are you feeding on right now? What thoughts are you feeding on? If it’s anything not related to the breath, you can notice, okay, it’s going to be stressful. For the time being, you will feed on the breath. That’s a lot less stressful than all the other things we feed on. If you’re going for a distraction, then you ask yourself, okay, why are you going? What’s leading you to cling to that distraction? And you say, well, there’s craving. You want something out of it. And the reason we want things out of our distractions is because of ignorance. We don’t see the process by which we create these things. We don’t see the results that come about. You look at a thought and you tend to look at it in terms of its content. What is it saying? But the Buddha says look at it as a process. It comes from something, it goes someplace. Where is it coming from? Where is it going? Craving plays a big role in its coming. And then lack of interest, just let go of it, that’s how it goes. It’s all pretty arbitrary. Craving knows no bounds. Yet out of these arbitrary movements of the mind, we create our desires about how we want to live our lives, what’s worth thinking about, what’s worth planning for. It’s all so arbitrary. And in a few rare cases, we actually accomplish something, but in most cases, what we accomplish just gets washed away. So the question is, why bother? You’re making a value judgment. You’re judging that the path to the end of suffering is much more important than whatever else would pull you away. And so you’re trying to get right back here. This is what you develop. The word “develop” here means to bring it into being and make it grow. You want your concentration to grow. You want your sense of well-being here, your sense of stability. You want this all to grow. And keep it simple. Because in the simplicity of all this is what allows things to be seen. Because otherwise you start having distractions. “Well, this is my thought. I like this thought. I want to go with this thought. There’s me, me, I, I, mine, mine.” And all the stories and all the associations that go with those terms. And there are times when thoughts of “me” and “mine” are useful, but we slap them on everything. We start identifying with all kinds of crazy things. Just because we thought it up, that’s something we want to continue thinking. Maybe it’s something we want to act on. But if you can learn how to see that label of “me” and “mine” as something arbitrary, and that you have the right to apply it to a thought or not, and you get practice not applying it so you can look at your thoughts without that coloration, that’s when you begin to realize a lot of things you’re thinking. You accomplish very little except what they create suffering. And there are some things that if you act on them, they’re not only going to have that suffering or stress right in the immediate present, but also on into the long term. This is why we’ve got to get some control over the mind. So learn to apply the Buddha’s understanding of suffering to the things that are pulling you away from the path. Which is right here in the mind, taking things apart, noticing the movements of the mind, how you place a perception on things, how you have your intentions, what you pay attention to, and how you can construct all kinds of different paths out of this. We talk about constructing worlds with our thoughts, but we’re also constructing paths. You get into a world and it induces you to do something. You take on an identity and it induces you to do something. You should ask yourself, “What are these things getting me to do? And these things that I’m doing, where are they going to take me?” Paths lead to the top of the mountain. As the Buddha said, there are paths that go down to cesspools. There are paths that go into pits of charcoal, burning charcoal. Paths that go to forests with no shade. Paths that go to nice places. Paths that go to Nirvana, which are nicer than nice places. So it’s important that we see these things as paths, these thoughts that we follow. They’re not just nice pastimes. All too often they’re a waste of time. And all too often they lead us to do things that we later regret. Or they cause us to act in ways because they’re so arbitrary that we act in arbitrary ways. If you were to trace the course of most people’s lives, it would be a real tangle. So a thought comes up and you ask yourself, “What path is this taking me on? Is this the path I want to go on?” And you think about the Buddha’s path. It’s the path to the total end of suffering, a dimension in the mind that can be touched, where there’s no birth, aging, illness, or death. There’s no coming, no going, no staying in place. It’s something that’s very hard to get your mind around, but you don’t have to get your thoughts around it. You can just find it there. That’s the important part about it. Are you content with where you’ve been, the things you’ve seen, the things you’ve known? Or do you want to go someplace that you’ve never seen before, never known before, which everybody who’s been there says is the ultimate happiness? It’s something we can do. We have this potential as human beings. Men, women, children, lay, ordained. No matter where you’re from, we all have this potential for true happiness, absolute happiness, ultimate. When you find your mind wandering off someplace else, ask yourself, “What kind of ultimate, absolute happiness is this leading to?” It helps put things into perspective. Because the mind sits here trying to decide what to pay attention to, what intentions to act on. Try to keep that perspective in mind so you can choose your path wisely and stick with it.

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