The Mind Likes to Lie to Itself

January 15, 2019

The passage we chanted just now comes from a discourse where a young monk is talking to a king. The young monk came from a very wealthy family. But he heard the Buddha, and he said that there were four things the Buddha said in his Dhamma talk that really hit home. They impressed him very deeply, so much so that he wanted to ordain. His parents were against it. He actually had to go on a hunger strike before they were willing to give in to his wish. So when he ordained, he went off, became an arahant, and then decided to return home. At first, the reception at home was not good. The father didn’t even recognize him. He shouted an insult at him as the young monk came for alms that morning. It was a servant woman who recognized him. So the family invited him in for a meal. So he went the next day. They tried to lure him back, and so he left them. They went to spend some time in the king’s pleasure grove. The king found out that the young monk was there. The young monk’s name was Rathabala. So the king went to ask him, “Why did you ordain? You’re wealthy. You have good health. You haven’t lost your relatives.” As far as the king was concerned, that’s why people ordain—loss of wealth, health, or relatives. So Rathabala told him the passages that we chanted just now. “The world is swept away. It does not endure.” The king said, “What do you mean by that?” Rathabala said, “When you were young, were you strong?” The king said, “Yes, sometimes I thought I had the strength of two people.” “How about now?” “No, now I’m eighty years old, and sometimes I mean to put my foot in one place and go someplace else.” That’s a principle of inconstancy, impermanence, this body that we’ve depended on when it leaves, it leaves bit by bit, and it doesn’t ask permission, and it doesn’t give any warning. Things you thought you could depend on in the body, you can’t really depend on. So that was the first reason. The second reason. The world offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. There’s no protector. The king said, “What do you mean by that? I have armies. I have my palace.” Rathabala said, “Do you have a recurring illness?” The king said, “Yes, I have a recurring wind disease,” which basically means shooting pains through the body. Sometimes I’m in bed in pain, and the courtiers and my family are hovering around saying, “Maybe you’ll die now, maybe you’ll die now.” Rathabala said, “Can you tell your friends and relatives and courtiers to help share out some of the pain so you don’t have to feel so bad?” The king said, “No, I have to bear the pain myself.” That’s what Rathabala says is what’s meant by the world has no shelter. There’s the principle of stress, suffering, pain, that we bear and no one else can share for us. Doctors can give us medicines, but they can’t take out the pain totally. Of course, there’s not just physical pain, but there’s mental pain, which is very hard to take away. Then there’s the third principle. The world has nothing of its own. Again, the king is curious. “I have all kinds of treasure stashed away in my palace and in my storerooms.” Rathabala said, “When you die, can you take it with you?” The king said, “Oh, no. I have to leave it behind.” Rathabala said, “In that case, it’s not really yours, not self.” The king said, “What do you mean we’re slaves? I’m a king.” Rathabala said, “Suppose someone were to say that there’s a kingdom off to the east, filled with all kinds of wealth, and its army is weak. You could conquer it if you wanted to.” “Would you try to conquer it?” The king said, “Yes, of course.” “The other person comes from the south and says there’s another kingdom down to the south. It has all kinds of treasures, all kinds of things that you would want, and the army is weak. You could conquer it.” “Would you go for that one?” “Sure. Same for a kingdom from the west and the north. And even a kingdom across the ocean, you’d still go for that one too.” In other words, the mind has no sense of enough. Here are these things that are inconstant, stressful, not self, aging, illness, and death. And yet we keep coming back. The Buddha says part of the reason is because we have distorted perceptions. We look at some things that are inconstant and we tell ourselves that they’re constant. We look at things that are stressful and we tell ourselves that they’re pleasurable. Things that are not self, we say they’re ours, they’re self. Things that are really unattractive, like the human body, we tell ourselves that they’re attractive. And so we build our hopes for happiness on a bunch of lies. You might say, “Well, it’s simply a matter of misperception.” We do the contemplations of seeing the body as unattractive. We can go down to the 32 parts. Imagine opening it up as you would open up a piece of fruit. What do you have inside? Well, it’s not nice like a fruit. It’s all kinds of stuff you wouldn’t want to be near. And yet here it is, right there next to you. And we know the body ages, and yet we try to keep it from aging. We don’t look for the signs. If we see the signs, we try to look past them. So one of the contemplations when you meditate is to imagine your body getting older, two years’ time, five years’ time, ten years’ time, fifteen, twenty, dying. Then decomposing, and finally being cremated and being nothing but dust. And then you bring it back, from dust, to the corpse, to the old person, back to where you are now, to remind yourself that this is where this body’s going to go. And you can think about all the things that are not self about your body. One of my favorite ones is that for the monks, we shave our heads. Now once it’s nicely shaved, we tell the hair not to grow. It’s not going to obey. We tell the body not to get sick, it doesn’t obey. We’re the ones who’ve latched onto it. It’s not attached to us at all. It feels no sense of obligation to us. We’ve fed it, cared for it, looked after it when it was sick. But it doesn’t care. And it doesn’t feel obligated, that it has forewarned us when it’s going to get old, or when it’s going to misfunction, or tell us what the misfunction is. So it’s totally not self. Now, we have some control over it, but ultimately it’s not really ours. And so we contemplate these things to give the mind a good dose of reality. But simply these perceptions on their own are not going to be enough. You straighten out these distorted perceptions. I’ve known many monks who’ve done body contemplation and then disrobe and get married. It’s because they thought that the problem was out there. It’s not. It’s inside. There’s still something in the mind. The mind is a slave to craving. It wants to see these things as something worth going for, even when you point out to it how many times, many times, that they’re not worth it. There’s a part of the mind that says, “I want it to be worth it.” That’s what you’ve got to look into. That’s what you’ve got to understand. And so we do these contemplations of the impermanent, impermanence of the body, the stress, the pain that goes into having to keep it up, and the fact that it’s going to leave you anyhow. And that’s not really attractive. So that when you start getting attached to it again, you can ask yourself, “Well, why are you going back? What do you still want to get out of it?” And the mind in the beginning will not give you its reasons. But the fact that you’ve hemmed it in this way by practicing with these perceptions helps you to see that no matter what it says, to try to get past you, to try to convince you, “Well, yes, it really is worth going for,” you have to regard it as a criminal who’s planning to go out and steal something from you. So you have to be very careful. You have to be very careful and not be deluded by its sweet stories. For instance, with sensuality. The Buddha doesn’t define sensuality as being attached to sensual objects or sensual pleasures. He says it’s being attached to sensual fantasies, the way we plan for sensual pleasures. And then after the pleasure is gone, how we dress it up to ourselves about what a wonderful pleasure it was and how it was really worthwhile so we can go looking for it again. That’s the problem. And so the mind sends out its little feelers to look for another pleasure. And so you practice these perceptions of straightening out the perceptions of permanence, pleasure, beauty, and self. You counteract them with the perception of inconstancy, stress, not-self, unattractiveness. So when the mind sends out its feelers, you say, “Okay, there’s nothing out there to go for. Why are you still going?” And that’s when you begin to see, “Oh, there’s something in the mind that keeps pushing.” Even when things are bad, it keeps trying to tell itself, “Well, it’s going to be worth it.” It’s when you see that it’s not worth it that’s when you let go. But you have to give the mind something better. That’s why we practice concentration, to get the mind still with a sense of solidity, well-being. So it’s more in the mood to do this kind of analysis. So it’s not quite so hungry and willingly being fooled. And Jhana Mahaprabhu talks about his analysis of the body as being unattractive, and he said he got so that no matter what human body he looked at, he could immediately take it apart in his mind. And he began to wonder, was he totally free of lust? So he decided to test himself. For several days he thought of a beautiful body just right next to his. And for the first three days there was no reaction in the mind. The fourth day there was a slight reaction, that maybe this was nice after all. So he realized, “The problem isn’t done with.” So now what was he going to do? He began to realize after a while that the problem was not with the bodies out there. It was the mind’s wanting to go for the perception of beauty. And he had to look into, why would it want that? And that was when he was able to get beyond. So remember, we’re trying to straighten out some distorted perceptions. And then look for, why does the mind distort the perceptions to begin with? When you can see through that, then you’ve accomplished quite a lot.

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