It’s Up to You

July 10, 2019

The Buddha wasn’t the sort of person who would go out looking for debates. But there are a couple of cases in the Canon where he actually does go seek out some other people, other teachers, because he’s heard of what they taught and he’s concerned. One case is where the teacher is taught that everything you experienced is determined by past actions. Another case was when someone was taught that there is no cause and effect in the world. You do things, but you can’t really expect there to be any effects of your actions. Everything is random. In both cases, he said, these teachings were unsatisfactory and irresponsible, because if everything were determined by what you did in the past, then if you were a killer or a stealer at the present moment, you wouldn’t be responsible. If everything were random, you’d kill and steal because of random reasons that you’re not responsible for. In both cases, the Buddha said, the teacher is irresponsible and the student is left bewildered and unprotected. What kind of protection should a teaching give? It gives you a basis for figuring that there is a reason to decide that something should be done and something should not be done. And even better, it gives you some ideas of what the should-be’s and the not-should-be’s are and how they can be found, how you can decide what should and shouldn’t be done. And that’s precisely what the Buddha provided. The basis for deciding what should be done. The should-be’s, of course, are the should-be’s in the Four Noble Truths, like we chatted just now. Suffering should be comprehended. Its cause should be abandoned. Its cessation should be realized, and the path to its cessation should be developed. Now, the should-be’s here are conditional. If you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you should do. The Buddha’s not forcing you, he’s not pushing these things on you. He’s simply pointing out that if you really are serious about putting an end to suffering, these are your duties. And he explains them in detail, talking about what you should do and how you should do it, how you should motivate yourself, and how you should judge the results of your actions. But from that point on, it’s up to you. In one sense, this is liberating. As John Fung used to say often, “Nobody hired us to practice. We’re here of our own free will, and we’re here for our own good.” That in and of itself should be enough to give us the motivation to want to practice. And yet we still find it difficult. Part of the reason is that we’ve got other shoulds operating in our minds as well. Shoulds we’ve picked up from our parents, shoulds we’ve picked up from work, from the media. And now that the media has invaded our minds more than any other time in history, with lots of different shoulds, it gets very confusing. This is an area where we have to stake out our own territory and think about our own true best interests. Do the people on your phone, do the people on your iPad, do the people on your computer, do they really have your best interests in mind? Or do they have theirs? Or do they have not even their best interests, just their interests? You have to question the values when something comes across as you’re at the media. You have to ask yourself, “Who wants me to believe this and why?” And only if you feel that the motivation is compassionate should you take it in. Otherwise, just think of it as something out there. As for in here, what do you really want in life? Stop and think about it. John Lee tells the story of the Buddha saying that the Buddha asked himself, “Are you really happy?” And the Buddha’s answer to himself was, “I want the ultimate happiness.” And from that point on, he was true to that desire. Our problem is that we’re kind of timid. Ultimate happiness sounds pretty far away. And so we settle for second or third or fourth best. And we find it’s not satisfying. It may seem easier, but it’s harder in the long run. So the Buddha set everything out. There’s virtue, concentration, discernment. He tells you how to do all these things. Like what we’re doing right now, we’re working at concentration. He tells us to breathe in and out sensitive to long breathing, short breathing. Try to breathe in and out aware of the whole body. Then let the breath calm down. Ultimately, it can calm down to the point where it seems to stop. Your awareness fills the body. The breath energies fill the body. You don’t feel any felt need to pull things in from outside, i.e., pull the breath in from outside. There’s breath in the body already, and there’s plenty. That’s an exercise that can give you lots to do just for this one hour. He talks about how to develop discernment. When the mind settles down, you try to see where in your state of concentration there’s form, where there’s feeling, where there’s perception, where there are thought fabrications—in other words, your intentions to put things together. Then there’s your consciousness, your awareness of these things. Now you wait until your concentration is really solid, and then you start taking it apart this way. You begin to see all the component factors of concentration. Even though they’re a lot more solid and constant than anything else out there, there still is some inconsistency to them. They’re still not satisfactory. There must be something even better. You develop dispassion for them, and that way you find what that something better is. The Buddha lays out the basic groundwork for concentration and discernment, and it’s simply up to us to work on it. First, to try to understand what he’s talking about and see where it corresponds to in our experience. But you find there are other voices in the mind that will pull you away. You’ve got to learn how to say no to them. You have to ask yourself, “What do I really want in life? Am I going to strive for the Buddha’s answer? Am I going to aim for the Buddha’s answer? Or am I going to aim for something less?” One of the things that pulls us away to something less, of course, is the fact that we have a felt need to feel. We need food, clothing, shelter, medicine. For laypeople, this requires work. It requires that you get a job and that you have to put up with the “shoulds” of your boss and the “shoulds” of the company. But you shouldn’t let them get very deep into the mind. You’ve got to have your own internal “shoulds” based on your desire for happiness, for something that’s really solid, something you can depend on. Because, as far as the company is concerned, when you get old they’ll push you out to pasture. Nowadays they may not even give you any pasture. So they shoot you and send you into the dog food factory. So do you really want to take on their values? When they no longer provide you with the food you need, what are you going to do? You have to depend on yourself. This is where that idea of a really reliable happiness that doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, and doesn’t die begins to make a lot of sense. So learn to talk to yourself. Listen to the different voices in the mind and sort them out. Which are the ones that you hold on to simply to make a livelihood, and which ones do you hold on to for the sake of your true well-being? And who should get priority? Don’t let the voices that encourage you to find true happiness get pushed off into the cracks. Imagine the modern world for a spirituality that doesn’t take up too much time, doesn’t take up too much energy, and promises quick results. But why do we like that? One, laziness. Two, impatience. We don’t want to put in too much effort and we want it to last just a little bit of time. We want to get the results and go back to our other affairs. But that’s getting our priorities all backwards. We have to see that true happiness has to take first priority. And whatever effort it requires is something we can stir up from within ourselves. Whatever patience it requires, we can stir up from within ourselves. As the Buddha said, he pointed out the way, but it’s up to us to follow it, to take what he taught about what is to be done and how it’s to be judged, and learn how to do it and get sensitive to the results of our actions so that we can judge for ourselves. This is what it comes down to. We’re not here trying to please the Buddha. We’re here to take care of something we really need. We think of the noble ones who have gone before us as good examples. It’s useful to think about if they were to look at our behavior right now, what would they think? But that’s simply a way of getting us to be serious about what we really want. And to remind ourselves that it is possible that other people have done this. So the Buddha points out the way, but it’s up to us to motivate ourselves to want to do it and to keep at it. And to remember to keep our priorities straight. Again, no one is forcing you to do this, but that’s the good thing about it. You can do this of your own free will. Just make sure that your free will doesn’t get tied down by things that are not so free, and that would pull you away from your best interest. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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