A Tilted Mind

May 11, 2021

The Buddhas aren’t named for the teaching they gave. It was this Dhamma in Vinaya. It’s always good to keep that in mind. If you’re going to read his teachings, don’t look only in the suttas. Also look in the Vinaya, because you’ll find there’s a different emphasis. For example, there’s the teaching that the Buddha calls the four ways of going off course. It’s mentioned only once or twice in the suttas, but it’s mentioned again and again in the Vinaya, in conjunction with the qualities that you’re looking for in someone who’s in a position of responsibility. You want to have a person who doesn’t go off course in any of those four ways. The four ways are bias based on desire, bias based on aversion, bias based on attachment, bias based on fear, and bias based on delusion. Bias based on desire is that you want something out of somebody, and so you treat that person better than you treat other people—maybe somebody you like especially, or just somebody that you think you can get some advantage from. You give them more than their fair share. As for bias based on aversion, it’s the opposite—something you really don’t like. So you give them less than their fair share. Bias based on fear is that you treat someone especially nice because you’re afraid of them. You’re afraid of what they may do to you. So you give into them in ways that you shouldn’t. And then bias based on delusion is that you either simply don’t know what’s going on, or your likes and dislikes, again, get so overwhelming that you can’t really see what’s going on. You can’t really judge other people properly. So as we live with one another, we want to make sure that we don’t give in to these forms of bias. The Thai word for translating them, “lamien,” brings out that bias. It’s tilted. The mind is tilted in a particular direction. It doesn’t stand straight up. It’s not balanced and fair. This, of course, becomes a real obstacle to our goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. The other night I talked about how these qualities, especially goodwill, is a determination. There are four aspects to every good that you want to develop. There’s discernment, understanding what it’s all about, understanding what your goal is with that particular quality you want to develop, and realizing the best way to go about it. And there’s truth. You want to be very clear about where your opinions come from. Is it based on real knowledge, or is it simply based on hearsay? Or is it based on reactions? And there’s renunciation. When you see that something is getting in the way of being fair, you are willing to let go of it. Whatever partisan ideas you may have, whatever likes and dislikes you may have, you realize that any of these ways of going, of course, are placing a limitation on you. It’s because you’re placing a limitation on your goodwill. You’re placing a limitation on your own mind. And then finally, calm. You practice in a way that’s patient, so you can follow the steps that your discernment lays out for you. And again, you don’t let your emotions get in the way. So these four ways of going, of course, are things you’ve got to learn how to relinquish. The problem is that when the mind is tilted like this, everything it sees is tilted, and what’s actually straight up and down looks tilted to that perspective. This is why you have to be willing to give the Buddha the benefit of the doubt. I was reading a strange piece this evening, some guy saying that now that Buddhism comes to the West, it’s going to have to accommodate itself to other things that we are committed to. The question is, what are we committed to and why? And this particularly has to do with our likes and dislikes. That teaching that we have goodwill for everybody is hardly true. Often we come into this lifetime with some unconscious memories of having dealt with a person, and when you meet that person again, if it was a bad encounter the last time, well, there’s an immediate dislike. So just because your instincts don’t like somebody doesn’t mean that they’re bad. All it means is that you may have had some bad encounters in the past. I think I’ve told you the story about that woman who had a father who had been a general under King Aśoka in a previous lifetime, and she had a memory of this one night as she was meditating. And King Aśoka beat her father in her presence one time. And then as she continued having that past life memory, then she began to remember her lives from that point on. That’s what happened to the present moment. It so happened that whoever King Aśoka was born as, she hated that person. Even though the person had changed quite a bit since the time of King Aśoka. Every lifetime, an instinctive dislike. So when you have an instinctive dislike of somebody, you have to wonder. Maybe it has nothing to do with them right now. Maybe it has something to do with them way in the past. Maybe you’re letting that attitude get in the way of your having really unlimited goodwill. Because again, you have to keep in mind, again and again, if you allow your likes and dislikes, your desires and your aversions and your fears and your delusion to place a limitation on your goodwill, you’re placing a limitation on yourself. There’s an area, suddenly, where you can’t behave in the proper way. Where you can’t be generous. Or if you’re generous to somebody out of either desiring something from them or fearing something from them, that means somebody else is getting deprived. So we have to take this into consideration. Maybe our likes and dislikes are not telling us the truth. We have to learn how to look past them. As the Buddha said, if you find something you don’t like in somebody’s behavior, look for something that’s good in their behavior. In Jhanli’s expression, be a person with two eyes, not just one eye. It’s the same for people from whom you desire something. Maybe there’s something in your mind that puts them in a wonderful light. Everything they do is perfect. But you’ve got to realize there must be something on the other side to them. You look for that. And as for the people you fear, you have to ask yourself, “Which is more fearful? What they might do to you or what you could do if you let unskillful mind states take over your behavior?” That’s the big danger. Nobody else can consign you to hell, but you have to ask yourself that. You can consign yourself to hell. So always be on the lookout for these ways of going off course. And watch out, especially when you get really self-righteous about your opinions. Learn how to be truthful about, “Well, where did you pick up your opinions about people?” Sometimes it’s just little casual things, like a glance, a word here or there, that you focus on. And you miss a lot of other things, because we all come with filters. I remember talking to my older brother one time about the lessons he picked up from our mother and father. When he was young, listening to him, I came up with a sense that it was almost as if we lived in a different household. The message he got from them, in some cases, was the same message, but in other cases it was very, very different. I chalked that up to the fact that we were very different people with very different filters. But that kind of realization should throw you back on yourself. How much limitation is being placed on you by your filters? Now can you learn how to see past them? Because it is possible to see past them. If it were not possible, the Buddha wouldn’t have taught. He said, “It is possible to develop skillful qualities where you’ve been unskillful in the past.” But it means learning how to place a question mark next to your opinions and things. Think about John Lee’s counsel. No matter how wonderful the insight that may come to you, you always have to ask yourself, “To what extent is the opposite true?” If there’s someone you really like an awful lot, what’s the opposite? If there’s someone you really dislike a lot, what’s the opposite? If there’s someone you’re afraid of, what’s the opposite? When you can learn to think in these ways, you can get that tilt out of your mind and see things straight up and down. Then your goodwill and all the other good qualities you’re trying to develop will have a good, solid, level foundation so that you can trust a lot more. And then you can be trusted a lot more, too. Because, after all, as I said, these qualities were mentioned a lot in the Vinaya about the kind of people you can trust in a position of responsibility. So if you want to be trustworthy, learn to look into the tilt in your mind. And see what you can do to straighten it out.

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