A Mind Bigger Than the World

August 3, 2021

And the night after the Buddha let go of his fabrications of life, knowing that within three months time he was going to pass away, he called a meeting of the monks. He told them to be very clear about the wings to awakening, because those seven sets of Dhammas form the heart of his teaching. Then he told them to make themselves into their own refuge. And he closed with a poem. One of the lines of the poem was, “Rich and poor, smart and stupid, people keep on dying, just as a pot is made so that someday it’s going to break. The same way we all die.” And Ajaan Chah, one of the forest masters, had a comment on that verse, saying, “Suppose you have a cup. You know someday the cup’s going to be broken. And so your attitude should be, well, it’s already broken. That’s to be expected. But you’re going to do your best in the meantime not to break it. You look after it, you care for it, you wash it. You don’t say, well, it’s going to be broken someday, so who cares? That’s careless, it’s useless. But at the same time you have to have in the back of your mind that if it does break, well, too bad. No big deal. It’s going to break anyhow. You do your best, but at the same time you don’t get worked up about it. This is the attitude we have to have toward the world. The Buddhism instructions for meditation, getting the mind at the right concentration, are described in his formula for right mindfulness. You have four frames of reference, and with regard to each frame, you have two duties. On the one hand, you try to keep track of that frame of reference in and of itself. And the other duty is to put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words, you’re choosing your focus. In this case, the breath. And you’re ardent, alert, and mindful to stay with the breath, to work with the breath, so the mind can settle down. And you don’t want anything related to the world to get in the way. This is why we exercise restraint of the senses. Try to keep our knowledge of the world outside down to an absolute minimum. Because the news is designed to get us distressed about the world. And what does it accomplish? We just see how it’s breaking down. Oh, it’s going to break. It’s already broken. That’s the attitude you should have. You say,”Well, where can I keep things from breaking?” Well, you look inside your own mind. When you focus on the breath, or on feelings, or on the mind itself, the real emphasis is on the mind. Because this is where the real work needs to be done. This is where you can make a difference. This is something that doesn’t have to break. In fact, the Buddha says, “Consciousness keeps on going, even when the body dies.” Consciousness will move on. It will move on to places where the results of your past actions are waiting for you. He says, “If they’ve been good actions, they’re like long-lost relatives, happy to see you again.” He doesn’t say the converse, which is, “If they’re bad actions, the kind of people they’ll be, and their attitude towards you when you come.” But you can make a difference inside here. When the Buddha formulated the Four Noble Truths, it wasn’t simply four interesting facts about an interesting topic. They formed the center of his teaching, because, as he said, the suffering we cause ourselves is the big issue in life. And as long as this issue is not addressed, no other solution to any other problem is going to be satisfactory. Because the things you solve outside can easily get broken. But the issues you solve inside stay solved. This is where you want to focus your attention. You’re working on the most important issue in life, the most important issue in your mind. From the point of view of the world, it may seem small, just one person working on his or her mind. You have to adopt their point of view. From your point of view, it’s everything. Your awareness, your consciousness, envelops everything else. In fact, as far as you’re concerned, right now, your awareness is bigger than the world. It contains the world. It’s your primary reality. So work with this reality. And then tertiary realities come in and take over. And don’t think that this is a small thing. Years back, I read a book called “Abduction.” It was about a psychologist who had studied people who’d had experiences of having been abducted by aliens. And many of them reported that the aliens came with a message for the human race, which is, “Stop spoiling the earth. Because if you keep on spoiling the earth, the earth is going to shrug. Get rid of these annoying little beings.” You look at that point of view, the earth shrugs. Earthquakes, volcanoes, pandemics. Huge numbers of people can get wiped out. And their hopes and their dreams. Get wiped out too. And from the point of view of the world, just one shrug of the world. We’re very small. We’re like fleas on the back of a dog. So it is important that we keep in mind the fact that we don’t know how much time we have. But we shouldn’t let that be a discouragement. In fact, we shouldn’t make that encourage us. So when the earth shrugs, we’ll still have something of solid worth. And again, it won’t be small. Compared to the sun, compared to the galaxies, we’re tiny little things. But if you look at it another way, our mind can encompass knowledge of the sun and the galaxies. It can think about the universe. The universe as a whole. And so this primary reality we have here, in terms of our body, they call it proprioception. Your body as you feel it from within. In terms of the mind, it’s called phenomenology. Just the phenomena of what it’s like to have a consciousness. That’s bigger than anything else. And try to keep it having that same priority. Don’t let the affairs of the world distract you from the real work at hand. As things break down outside, we do our best to shore them up, fix them when we can. It would be irresponsible if we didn’t. But we have to realize there’s only so much we can do. And there’s only so much anybody has ever been able to do. Look at the Buddha. There were wars going on in his time. He couldn’t stop them. Even in the last year of his life, King Ajatashatru came and wanted some advice on how to conduct a war. The Buddhists know. Maybe they have a good perspective on this. So you can imagine what the Buddha was thinking. Here he’d come to teach people how to stop suffering. And yet they were so intent on continuing to suffer. There are people he tried to teach. There’s one monk who disrobed and spent his time going around denouncing the Buddha. So if you look at it in that term, in those terms, his teaching career was not a complete success. You look at it in other terms though. All the numbers of people who really did benefit from it. In fact, he was able to establish a Dhamma and Vinaya that’s lasted, what now, 2,600 years. No one else has been able to match that attainment. So from that point of view, it was a success. So as we look at our impact on the world and see that the world is going to go its own way. So that’s what it’s like to be a human being. Another time I was reading a book on the losses in World War I. And they were pointing out the fact that there were many young artists, authors, musicians, composers, who suddenly had to fight in the war and died in the war. And who knows what would have happened to Western culture if that war had not happened. It might have gone in a very different direction. All that talent was wasted. So it’s normal that the human realm has a lot of waste, a lot of missed opportunities. But for your practice, remember, the big missed opportunity would be that you had the chance to practice and you didn’t, or you didn’t give it your all. So keep your priorities straight. Right here is where things matter. Each time the mind wanders off, and you catch it, you bring it back. That’s an important accomplishment. You’re gaining control over the mind. You’re strengthening your mindfulness, your alertness, which are precisely the qualities you need to get into right concentration. So as the Buddha said, when you do something well in the practice, take joy. It’s interesting, he says, you don’t let yourself be content with your skillful qualities, but at the same time you take joy in them. You realize that you’re on the right path. You take them as encouragement to keep on going. They get better and better. So even though things outside fall apart, you don’t fall apart with them. As John Lee pointed out, the nature of the body is that it’s going to grow ill, it’s going to age, and it’s going to die. Strength of the body is sure to deteriorate, but strength of the mind does not have to. So when you’re working on the mind, you’re working on something that has lots more potential than the world. And it’s totally yours to work with. So do your best. (crickets chirping)

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2021/210803_A_Mind_Bigger_Than_the_World.mp3>