A Universal Message

June 15, 2023

The Buddha once told a story of a previous Buddha who had gone up to the Brahma worlds with one of his students who had a lot of psychic power. The student teaches the Brahmas. The Brahmas were offended. “Why won’t the Buddha teach us himself? Why does he delegate us just to one of his students?” So the student starts showing off. He shows off some of his powers. He makes his upper body disappear, then his upper body reappears and his lower body disappears, as he teaches. Then he wrenches it so that he can say a verse that reverberates through the entire cosmos. The message of the verse is heedfulness. It’s through heedfulness that we can put an end to suffering and stress. Stop and think about it. Suppose you could get your voice so that it would reverberate through the cosmos. What message would you want to send? The Buddha, in that case, approved of the message because, as he said, all of our skillful qualities come from heedfulness. In other words, we realize that there are dangers, but through our actions we can provide ourselves with safety from the dangers. Of course, the primary dangers are not the ones outside. All those are bad enough. The ones inside are the dangers of our own thoughts or our own attitudes, greed, aversion, and delusion. We’ve got to do something about these. We’ve got to provide ourselves with safety from them. Fortunately, the mind is not so corrupt that it has to depend on an outside power. The mind also has its good qualities. The mind is so dual like this. The basic teaching of the Buddha—one of his teachings that he said was categorical, i.e., true across the board all the time—was that skillful behavior should be developed and unskillful behavior should be abandoned. This means that our discernment has to see what’s skillful and what’s not. So we provide it with training. The first order of training is to get the mind still enough so that it can begin to absorb itself well. As the Buddha said, the Dhamma is nurtured by two qualities. One is that you commit yourself to doing it. Secondly, you reflect. What are the results that you’re getting? Are they satisfactory? Are they not? If they’re not, what could you do to improve? This is how any skill is developed. It’s important to realize that we’re here mastering a skill. The skill involves technique. It also involves values. Values of consistency. Learning how to rely on yourself. Learning how to be fair in your judgment of your own actions. There are people who say that one of the reasons that human beings are more neurotic now than they used to be is that they don’t have manual skills, because there are a lot of good qualities you develop as you master a manual skill. It’s like that business of being fair in your judgments. It’s all too easy when you don’t have any specific skills to get some very unrealistic ideas about what you are capable of or what you could be capable of, because it is a humbling experience. You try to master something, and you can see your workmanship is shoddy. It’s not up to standard. Some people get depressed. Other people say, “Well, here’s a challenge.” Other people can get their workmanship up. They didn’t all start as masters of the skill. What do you do? You try to do it better the next time, and then look at the results, and then better the next time. You get a good sense of when it goes well, why it isn’t going well. You begin to see cause and effect. It’s having a clear sense of cause and effect. That’s what keeps us from being neurotic. I’ve mentioned that experiment they did with pigeons. They put some pigeons in a cage with a red bar and a green bar. Sometimes when they pressed the green bar, they would get food, and sometimes they wouldn’t. Sometimes they pressed the red bar and got food, and sometimes they wouldn’t. They became very neurotic because there was no way of figuring out what was working and what wasn’t. Whereas pigeons in another cage, when they pressed the green bar, they got food, and when they pressed the red bar, they didn’t. That was it. They were very well-adjusted pigeons. Our problem is that we live in a world where things are very complex. But when you narrow things down to a simple task like this, learning how to be with the breath, you can gain some control over the variables. Are you mindful? Are you not? Are you alert? Are you not? When you do something, when you breathe in a certain way, what results do you get? You find some days that the body likes long breathing, and other days it likes shorter breathing. Learn to listen. Then you’ll be able to pick up the subtleties. It’s not superhuman. This is something that can be done. Just keep coming back, coming back, trying to be as observant as you can. That’s why the Buddha said that this is what he was looking for in a student, that the student be honest and no deceiver. That means not deceiving him or herself or other people, and being observant. Or as John Fung used to say, “Don’t expect to have everything handed to you on a platter, because you don’t develop your own discernment that way.” Everything is pre-digested, everything is pre-arranged. If we had a foolproof path, any fool could do it and still be a fool. The path requires that you use your discernment, that you look at what you’re doing and decide what could be done better, and then give it a try. All this grows out of heedfulness. Nobody’s forcing us to meditate, nobody’s forcing us to practice. We realize, though, that we’re suffering, and a lot of the suffering comes from our own actions. That’s a painful thing to think about. It’s one of the reasons why people like to place the blame someplace else. The Buddha says it’s not a blame game. More simply, it’s looking to see how cause and effect work in your life. When you recognize that you’ve done something poorly, try something else and get a sense of how it works. We all come from mistakes. Even the Buddha himself made a lot of mistakes, even in his last life. Those six years of austerities were a big mistake. But he recognized it as a mistake. All too many people do a lot of mistakes and commit themselves to a life like that, and they get proud of their austerities. Even the Buddha compared himself to others. He said nobody else had committed themselves to austerities as rigorous as his. But then he realized that if he kept at it, he was going to die and not gain anything. So he was willing to admit that was wrong, that he tried something new. And he finally found that what he needed was a middle path. And the middle paths are the most difficult because they require that you balance things. But we have the example of the Noble Disciples as to what a good balance is. One of the reasons why we have a monastery where our values are different from the world is because the world is totally out of balance. We try to have a different set of customs, a different set of attitudes, what the texts call the customs of the noble ones, which don’t lean toward any particular custom of any particular country or group. But they do incline the mind to nibbana. Those are values you want to absorb for your own good. Because where do the values of the world lead you? They use you up and then they throw you away. The Buddha taught the Dhamma out of kindness, out of compassion, because he saw that we are in danger. But we have within us the capability of overcoming those dangers, protecting ourselves from them, so we can reach what he called not only nibbana, which is only one name for the goal–safety, refuge, harbor, the secure. So the values that lead in that direction, values of modesty, values of being easy to support, being unentangled, these are good virtues to try to maintain, even though these are not the virtues that the world encourages. But they are for your own good, for your safety. When I first came here, I gave a Dhamma talk in San Diego. One of the people in the group said, “Why is it that Buddhists pander to the attitude that psychedelics are bad for you? You can get a lot of insights through psychedelics.” I said, “Well, the Buddha basically wanted a safe path. Psychedelics are not safe. Occasionally it’s like shooting a bird at night. You might hit a couple of birds, and then you end up in the sky. But there’s no guarantee. The Buddhist path, if you follow it carefully, is a safe path, because it teaches you how to be circumspect and heedful. So whatever foolishness you had as you came, you began to recognize it. And that’s how you become wise. So it starts with very simple principles like this. Be heedful. Try to be skillful. And everything else comes from there.

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