Noble Dhammas

July 24, 2023

When we have an ordination, the preceptor gives some instructions at the end to the new monk. The necessary parts have to do with the requisites the monk will have to expect as his basic standard of living, and it’s pretty basic. If you have no other place to stay, stay under the shade of a tree. No other cloth, find scraps that have been thrown away, sew it together, make a robe. Then there are four things that a monk should never do, which are the precepts that would make them a non-monk. And then there’s an optional part at the end that has been traditionally added to what the Buddha said. It has to do with what are called the four noble dhammas. Virtue, concentration, discernment, and release. There’s a good reason that these were added. The sutta that describes the Buddha’s last year talks about how wherever he went, that was the theme of his, what you might say, the theme of his final tour. And the emphasis is that all of them work together. We follow the precepts, not so that we’ll be rewarded for being a good little boy or a good little girl, but it’s because the precepts force us to look at our intentions as we go through the day. They’re designed in such a way that if you break the precept unintentionally, then you haven’t really broken the precept. So the emphasis is there on the intention. This was a big point for the teachings of the forest tradition, because the textbooks that were coming out of Bangkok in those days defined virtue simply as orderly actions and orderly speech, with no mention of the mental element that went into them. As Ajahn Ma would say, this turns the precepts into rituals. You just go through the motions, and you hope that by going through the motions you accomplish some ritual end. And he insisted that the element of intention was much more important. In fact, there was one time when he was asked which of the precepts he followed, because that was also an issue back in those days. The Bangkok hierarchy said basically that the basic code of 227 rules, the bodhimukha, was enough for the monks, and any other rules that were there in the Vinaya were optional. And as we know from the testimony of all those who went to study with Ajahn Ma, he did not regard the remaining rules as optional. They were an important part of the training. But there was one time he said he only observed one precept, and that was the mind. But you look after the intentions of your mind, and that will cover any misdeeds that you might do, because you’re not going to do anything wrong. You’re certainly not going to intend to do anything wrong, and it covers everything. Now the point there is that the precepts are not to make you worried about the details here and there, although you do observe them. But if you can get more and more control over your mind, then you know you’ve got them covered. That of course leads to concentration. These are called the precepts that are pleasing to the noble ones, conducive to concentration, for the very reason that they focus your attention on your mind. Because that’s what you’re going to be looking at as you meditate. You may be focused on the breath as the topic, but we’re not here to get the breath. We’re here to get the mind. And Ajahn Fuyung had a nice analogy. He said it’s like you’re trying to catch eels. Your mind is slippery like an eel. And if you jump down into the mud and try to catch eels with your bare hands, they just go slithering off every which way. But if you find something they like, then they’ll come. He said what eels really like are dead dogs. It’s not a very pretty image, but you find a dead dog, stick it into a big clay jar, stick it under the water, and the eels will come. And then all you have to do is put your hand over the mouth of the jar and you’ve got the eels. So you may not like thinking about the breath as a dead dog, but think of it as something the mind likes. This is one of the reasons why we focus on the sensation of breathing in the body, not so much the passage of air through the nose. Because the passage of air through the nose is not necessarily either pleasant or unpleasant, it’s just there. Whereas the movement of the energy in the body can be very definitely pleasant or unpleasant. Unpleasant if you tighten things up, block things, so that you feel you can’t breathe with your whole body. But you can make it pleasant by dissolving away those patterns of tension. So you work with the breath. You find that it becomes really absorbing. It’s not just in, out, in, out. It has lots of different ins and outs. Long, short, heavy, light, deep, shallow, harsh, gentle. And you find that the body at different times will need different types of breathing. So you listen to the needs of the body, you listen to the needs of the mind, you get more and more sensitive to what’s going on here, at the same time that you settle down. The settling down is important, because if you’re going to see anything clearly, you have to be still. There are a lot of subtle movements in the mind, especially the subtle beginnings of different defilements or different hindrances. And you’re not going to see them if you’re making a lot of noise yourself. So quiet the mind by giving it something that it likes, something that it finds interesting. And it’ll stay. Once it stays, it forms the basis for insight, for discernment. And part of it is just that. When it’s still, you can see things more clearly. But in the process of getting it to become still, you’ve learned a lot about how your mind works. And this way the concentration becomes conducive to discernment, particularly the kind of discernment that releases the mind. So you can be discerning about all kinds of things. But to get discerning about how the mind ties itself down, how it places fetters on itself, through its passions, that’s something that’s hard to see, and often hard to admit. This is where, as I said the other day, we’re training both the heart and the mind. Because it’s part of the heart that feels passionate about things, and precisely the things that make you suffer. So you have to be willing to look at how you make yourself suffer. And admit that yes, there is part of you that likes that, but you’re willing to admit the drawbacks. Don’t expect the heart will leap up. In fact there’s a passage where the Buddha talks about renunciation. He says that when he was a young monk and he realized that he was going to have to renounce his sensual thoughts, his heart didn’t leap up at the idea. But the more he considered things, the more he realized that if he didn’t get past sensuality, he’d never get free. So he looked at the drawbacks, compared the drawbacks with the appeal of these things, until he could see that it really wasn’t worth it. This is where you find that you’ve been the one that’s been causing trouble all along. There’s a strange passage in the Canon where they talk about how the sounds are not the fetter of the “I”. The “I” is not the fetter of the sounds. And in the abstract it sounds strange. It goes down through all six senses. But you have to realize that the Buddha’s definition of the world is just the six senses. And we very definitely do feel fettered to the world. It’s hard to get out. And so the Buddha says, well, reduce your concept of the world to just the six senses. The question as to whether there really is a world out there or not, put that aside. Just focus on what is your experience of the senses right here, right now. The sound of the crickets, the sound of the dharma talk, the temperature of the air, the contact between your rear and your legs, and then the cushion on which you’re sitting. Try to reduce everything to just that. And ask yourself, how do I feel fettered to these things? And if you reduce everything to that, it’s a lot easier to say, well, these are just sensations. It’s when we think about the world out there as being the real world, and somehow the world inside our mind is not quite so real. But then you can ask yourself, what kind of real world is it out there? As we chanted just now, the world is swept away. It does not endure. And the values of the world, we live in a world where greed, aversion, and delusion are rewarded. People become our leaders largely because of their greed. And they’re willing to pull us who knows where because of their greed, aversion, and delusion. And society at large depends on people’s greed, their desires, their craving, all of which the Buddha says is going to make you suffer. Living totally in the world is bad for you. If you want to be safe, you have to at least step out a little bit. That’s what the Buddha has to offer, a way to step out. So first you reduce the world to just your experience of the senses, and ask yourself, what is there that’s really worth getting tied down to? And the more you see these things just come, go, come, go, come, go, and they have no loyalty to you at all. You begin to question, well, why should I be loyal to them? In other words, why should I invest so much of my sense of their reality? When you can look at the world in that way, it gets a lot easier to let it go. And to let go of the things that you’re holding on to. And that’s how the mind gets released. The image they use in the canon is of fire. The way physics of fire was understood in those days was that fire needed to cling to something in order to burn. And if it was going to go out, it had to let go. And then it would go to a state of coolness, stillness. Stop its agitation. And be totally unlocated. So the analogy is with the mind. And that image of the eye and the sights not being the fetter. It’s your passion in between that’s fettered them. It’s your holding on to these things. When you let go, that’s when you’re released. They don’t cling to you, they don’t hold you back. You’re the one holding yourself back. When you can see that and stop it, that’s how release happens. So those are the Noble Dhammas. The Buddha’s basic message to the world, this is why when he was summing up his career of teachings, this is a theme that he returned to again and again and again. It starts with something very simple and very familiar. How you behave, whether you kill or don’t kill, steal or don’t steal. It begins with that sense that you know deep down inside that it’s better not to kill, not to steal. And that you have more self-esteem when you abstain from unskillful behavior. And building on that sense of self-esteem, then the Buddha teaches you, this is how you free yourself. For some reason this evening I got several letters, all of which had to do with people’s feelings about past bad karma they’d done. Now they find it difficult to relate to it. But the Buddha’s saying, you don’t have to worry about the past bad karma. If there’s anything bad you did, you admit the fact that yes, that was a mistake. You don’t want to repeat it. But that doesn’t mean you’re unworthy of the path. The Buddha didn’t save the path just for people who were already good. He didn’t ask you, are you suffering because you deserve to suffer? He simply said, here, if you’re suffering, this is how you put an end to it. The emphasis is on what you’re doing right here, right now. And if you really can put together the path in this way, virtue, concentration, discernment, the results are going to be release. And the nobility of the release gives nobility to the whole path. People behaving in a noble way. You don’t hear much discussion of that. In our society. Years back when I was giving a little talk to a group up in Orange County, I happened to mention the word dignity. There was a Russian emigre in the audience and she came up afterwards and she said in all the years she’d been in America, and she’d been there for about, here about for 10 years at that time, she’d never heard anybody mention the word dignity. She’d learned it when she learned English in Russia. Buddhists seem to be absent in people’s view of the world. That’s a shame. We’ve lost a lot of good things. Nobility, dignity, circumspection, restraint. But just because the culture has lost those things doesn’t mean that we have to lose those things. And the Buddha shows us how we can behave in a noble way and act toward a noble goal. That was the message he wanted to make sure he left behind. So there it is for you to pick up and to use.

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