In Context (outdoors)

October 29, 2023

One of the principles in practicing and learning the Dhamma is we have to think it through. We don’t just accept things. We don’t leave paradoxes or inconsistencies unexplored. I was reading about a Buddhist teacher recently who said, in response to a student who was complaining, that the teacher’s teachings didn’t fit together, that they were inconsistent. The teacher said, “Well, that’s because the truth is paradoxical. If something is paradoxical, you know it’s true.” Which wasn’t what the Buddha said. He said, “If you learn something new, you have to fit it in with what you already know of the Dhamma and see where it does and doesn’t fit in. If it doesn’t fit in with the basic principles of the Dhamma, you have to question your interpretation or just put the whole thing aside.” Case in point, we’re here practicing concentration, trying to get the mind to settle down, stay with one object, the breath. That requires thinking and it requires an intention. It requires a sense that you’re going to benefit from this, also a sense that you’re competent to do this, because concentration is something you do. The whole path is something you do. But some people have complained. They say, “Well, we’re told that having a sense of self makes you suffer, and so if concentration requires a sense of self, maybe you shouldn’t do it at all. Maybe let it happen if it does happen, but don’t try to force it to happen if it won’t.” But that’s getting the basic principles mixed up. When you think about the Dhamma, you have to remember what comes first and what comes after. In this case, the Buddha’s very first teaching was about the Noble Path, and part of the Noble Path is the Four Noble Truths. Each of those truths entails a duty. The truth that suffering is cleanliness, clinging is something you should try to comprehend, and try to comprehend the suffering itself in the act of the clinging. The cause of suffering, craving, is something you should try to abandon. The cessation of suffering, which comes with the cessation of craving, is something you want to realize, and the path is something to develop. So that’s the basic principle. And then there’s the question of what they call the Three Characteristics, or the Three Perceptions. The principle that everything that’s a product of intentions is inconstant and stressful, and all experiences in the six senses are not self. But that teaching, the Buddha never said, was categorical. He did say the Four Noble Truths were categorical. In other words, true and beneficial across the board, everywhere, always. The implication there is that’s the basic truth that should form the context. And then the question of those Three Perceptions is where do they fit in with the Four Noble Truths? The answer is they fit in with the duties of trying to comprehend suffering and abandon craving. You have to understand that the things that you crave are not going to provide you with the satisfaction you want. And so to emphasize that point, you learn to see their aspect as being inconstant. In other words, they’re not dependable. They change up and down, in and out. Because they’re so inconstant, they are stressful. You try to find happiness there. It’s like trying to sit in a chair where the legs are not all strong. You have to tense up to make sure the chair doesn’t tip over. And if it’s inconstant and stressful, is it worth calling yourself? You have the choice of making a sense of self around that or not. You decide it’s not worth it. That’s how you let go. That’s how you abandon the craving. So the context is the Four Noble Truths and the duties appropriate to them. So if they require a sense of self, to develop concentration while you develop that sense of self. The Buddha talks about the self as its own mainstay, the self as a governing principle in your life. In other words, the sense that you really do love yourself. You came to this path because you wanted to put an end to suffering, so you don’t want to give up. So sometimes it is good to create a sense of self. Eventually you let go of that sense of self when you’ve found the goal. Because even not-self is a perception. You have to let go of that, too. But in the meantime, you learn how to use these perceptions wisely in line with the proper time, the proper place. So right now, as you’re trying to get the mind into concentration, you don’t just let it wander around wherever it wants to. You give it a topic, like the breath, and then as for any other thoughts that come up, you just tell yourself, “I don’t have to identify with those thoughts.” That can be your not-self. So learn how to use these concepts in context. Learn to use them at the right time, the right place, and they won’t bite you. The Buddha talks about the Dhamma as being like a snake. You want to catch the snake to get its venom, to use as an anti-venom. But you have to know how to catch it. If you catch it by the tail, it’ll turn around and bite you. But if you take a forked stick and pin down the snake right at its neck, then you can get the venom out of it as you like and then let it go. In the same way, you learn how to use the Dhamma at the right time, at the right place, and that way you benefit. So this is why it’s good to think about the Dhamma. And when you’re thinking about the Dhamma, you have to remember that in every topic of the Dhamma that the Buddha taught, as he said, all he taught was suffering, or stress, dukkha, and then the end of suffering and stress. So in any other teaching you may run across, you ask yourself, “How does this fit into understanding suffering? How does it fit into developing the path to the end of suffering?” And use whatever concepts, whatever strategies, whatever techniques fit in with that main framework. And that’s how you think about the Dhamma in the most productive way.

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