

Timeless Dhamma

August 31, 2007

When we're practicing the Dhamma, observing the precepts, developing concentration and discernment, we're following a path that was set out more the 2,500 years ago. The reason we're still following it is because it addresses a problem that hasn't changed. It's not as if what was designed to deal with a particular problem that came up in one culture or one part of the world, it doesn't apply to our culture or our part of the world. As the Buddha said when he first conceived the desire to go out into the forest to find his way, it was in response to things he noticed in his life that we have in our lives as well. He noticed that he was subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, and that if he were to try to find a happiness in things that are also subject to aging, illness, and death, that happiness wouldn't last.

He also noticed that if he, when he was young, took pride in his youth, that wouldn't be fitting because someday he was going to be old, just like all the old people he saw around him. It wasn't fitting that he look down on them. If he took pride in his health, again it wouldn't be fitting because someday he'd be subject to illness. If he took pride in the fact he was still alive, well, someday he was going to die, so this pride wasn't appropriate.

These are the facts that the Dhamma is aimed at dealing with: the fact that we want happiness, but aging, illness, and death stand in the way. Now, those reflections we chanted just now didn't stop at aging, illness, and death. They also moved on to separation, which is pretty much more of the same. But the fifth reflection—"I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions"—points the way out. If we're going to find any happiness that lies beyond aging, illness, death, and separation, it's going to depend on straightening out our actions, finding a path of action that can lead beyond.

This is what the basic elements of the path—virtue, concentration, and discernment—are all about. The Buddha's notion of action covers not just physical action or acts of speech, but also acts of mind. If you want to find a way that leads to true happiness, you'll have to train all areas of action, in particular, the acts of the mind, because this is where everything comes from.

This is what the training is aimed at. We observe the precepts because it helps us to keep our intentions in line, keep them consistent. We realize that if our happiness depends on someone else's misery or on causing harm to other people,

that happiness can't last. It's a very pragmatic observation. After all, other people want happiness, too.

There's the passage where King Pasanadi is in his inner apartment with his queen and he asks her: "Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" He's probably expecting her to say, "Yes, Your Majesty. You." But she says, "No. And how about you? Is there anybody you love more than yourself?" "Well, no," he has to admit. That's the end of the romantic interlude.

So the king leaves the palace and goes to see the Buddha. And the Buddha says, "What she said is true. If you look all over the world, you'll find no one you would love more than yourself. And in the same way, other people love themselves more than anyone else." From this, his conclusion isn't that you should just go ahead and work for your own happiness, the hell with everybody else. Instead, he notes that, given the fact that everyone loves him or herself, you can't base your happiness in their misery, because they'll try to destroy it. So you have to take their happiness into the considerations. At the very least, don't harm them.

This is what the precepts are all about. You take the precepts as a promise to yourself that you're not going to harm anyone, and you try your best to stick with it, because you know the mind has lots of different intentions. It can wander all over the place and make a determination one minute, and two minutes later it has totally forgotten and is doing something else entirely. You have to make a vow to yourself, a promise to yourself that you're not going to harm anyone by killing, stealing, engaging in illicit sex, lying or engaging in any of the forms of wrong speech, or taking intoxicants.

You set up that intention and then you have to develop mindfulness and alertness to maintain it. This is where training of the precepts begins to shade into training of the mind. Without mindfulness and alertness, you forget the precepts and you don't really notice what you're doing. Then it's very easy to break the precepts. So you've got to work on developing mindfulness to remember the precepts, and alertness to keep watch over your actions.

This is precisely the role of concentration. As they say in the texts, right concentration takes as its themes the establishing of mindfulness, which requires mindfulness, alertness, and ardency, to keep watch over, for instance, the body in and of itself. The "in and of itself" here means that you simply look at the fact that you've got a body here, and you can focus on any one of its aspects. Like right now: You're focusing on the breath coming in, going out. You're not concerned with how your body manages in the world, whether it's good-looking or strong enough or resilient enough to take on the tasks you want to take on. You just look at the fact you've got a body here. Try to look at the raw materials of your

experience on their own terms. And make a practice of sticking with it. In this case, you keep remembering to stay with the breath each time it comes in, each time it goes out. That's mindfulness.

Alertness is watching the breath and also watching over your mind to make sure it stays with the breath. If it moves off, you bring it right back. Moves off again, bring it right back again.

This is ardency: You really stick with it and try to do it right. When you're with the breath, maintaining your focus, ardency means trying to be as sensitive as possible to make it pleasant. After all, in the Buddha's instructions for breath meditations, a lot of space is devoted to making the breath easeful. It's a training. Once you get sensitive to the breath to see whether it's short or long, then you train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. Then you calm the effects of the breath on the body. That makes you sensitive to rapture, sensitive to pleasure. You become sensitive to how your perceptions of the breath affects rapture and pleasure. In other words, what ways of thinking about the breath can give rise to feelings of intense rapture? Thinking of the breath as a quality of the whole body, not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, changes the way you relate to the breathing process and enables you breathe in a way that's more satisfying throughout the body, throughout the whole nervous system, out to every pore. This makes you more sensitive to how your perceptions affect your experience of even simple physical processes like the breath.

This turns your awareness more and more inward, to the way the mind moves, to the way the mind's intentions and perceptions, i.e., the labels it puts on things, have an impact on how you experience things, in particular your experience of pleasure and pain, freedom and bondage.

The Buddha's breath meditation instructions are divided into 16 steps, arranged in four tetrads. In the first two tetrads, the pattern is to sensitize yourself to a certain aspect of fabrication, either physical fabrication or mental fabrication, and then to try to calm the fabrication. That points you to the mind. That's the theme of the next two tetrads. In each of those cases, it's more a matter of getting sensitive to certain aspects of the mind, what state it's in, what raw materials it uses to fabricate experience in each of those cases. Then you try to liberate yourself from any sense of bondage, any sense of being tied down.

This is how concentration shades into discernment. The Buddha never makes a clear distinction between concentration practices and discernment practices. Basically, the more sensitive you get in your concentration, there you have it, right there: the themes for discernment, the themes for gaining insight. In this way, you

see how, for instance, how craving can cause suffering. And you notice that the things you crave are really not worth the craving. No matter how much you try to create happiness out of these inconstant, stressful, not-self aspects of your life, it's bound to fall apart. It's like building a house out of frozen ice cream. As long as the ice cream stays cold, it's going to serve as a house, but then it begins to melt. Or even worse, a house out of frozen meat: You can stay in the house only as long as it's cold outside, but when it begins to heat up, you've got to get out.

So as you get more and more sensitive in the concentration, that leads you to develop a greater sense of dispassion toward the things you've been struggling for in life. Fortunately, as you learn how to let go of these things, the mind opens up to a totally different dimension, a happiness that's unconditioned. And that's the solution to the problem, because this happiness lies beyond the aggregates of the body, aggregates in the mind, lies beyond all conditions entirely, so it's not in any place where it can be touched by aging, illness, or death.

This is why the Buddha's teachings have lasted all these years. Even though he often talked about the inconstancy of things, it's not because everything is inconstant, simply that we look for happiness in inconstant places. There is a happiness that is constant, there is a happiness that lies beyond all the change in the world. So some things change, some things don't. The basic human problem doesn't change. It's still there. We still suffer from aging, illness, and death. No matter how much they've come up with new medicines, they haven't been able to stop these processes. At the same time, the path beyond these things hasn't changed, either.

This is why the Buddha said the Dhamma is *akālika*: It's timeless. If we devote ourselves timelessly to the practice—in other words, we're willing to take on whatever is required in the practice—we can touch that timeless Dhamma as well. If we make demands and say, "Nowadays, things have to be this way, things have to be that way," we miss out on what's timeless. We stay stuck in time. Being stuck in time brings us what? Aging, illness, and death over and over again.

So this is our opportunity to find something timeless. As long as we don't take the particulars of our lives or our attitudes or our views and let them get in the way, we can have a share in that timelessness as well.