

The Buddha's Conventions

August 14, 2021

I know of a monk who's occasionally asked to name children, and he says he doesn't like doing it because that's the beginning of social conditioning: Giving the child a name makes it have a sense of self.

It strikes me as a strange attitude to have. After all, everybody needs a name. As Ajaan Chah once said, "If we just called out, 'Person, person, person,' nobody would know who was being called." The Buddha himself called people by their names: He didn't call them *aggregates*. "Aggregates come here. Aggregates go away." Rāhula, he called Rāhula; Sāriputta, Sāriputta; Citta the elephant trainer, he called Citta.

There's nothing inherently wrong with developing a sense of self. In fact, you need one in order to function in this world. If you're not trained in a wise sense of self, you're going to pick up a sense of self willy-nilly anyhow, so you might as well learn a wise one. It's one of those assumptions that people just make—they're primed for it.

The question is, how do you teach someone to develop a good one? That's what the Dhamma is all about: examining our assumptions and asking ourselves what skillful assumptions we can adopt to question our old perceptions, to see what purposes they serve. Because every perception serves a purpose, good or bad.

As when you're learning a language: In some cases, people will point things out to you and say, "This is called that, and this means this." But often you simply pick up meanings by noticing how people use words. Sometimes your assumptions are wrong, and you have to adjust them. Sometimes they work well enough so that even though they may be a little off, they're okay for you because they serve your purposes.

But when you come to the Dhamma, the question becomes not how to get rid of your social conditioning, but: What purposes do you want to serve with your conditioning? In what ways do you need to be re-conditioned to serve those purposes? Because our idea of a perception that's true basically comes down to: Does it work well enough?

For a lot of people, their attitude toward *well enough*, their definition of *well enough*, is pretty low. The Buddha is asking you to raise it: How about if *good enough* was *total happiness*, and anything inferior to that was not? How would you sort your perceptions out then?

This is where we want to look at the Buddha's vocabulary: the way he teaches the Dhamma. One of the things that's really necessary for gaining stream-entry or first taste of awakening is listening to the true Dhamma, recognizing the true Dhamma, and adopting its assumptions. In other words, the Buddha is going to condition us as to what kind of perceptions are useful, what kind of thought constructs are useful, what ways of fabricating our experience are going to be helpful in that direction. He teaches us how to use these things as tools, knowing that at some point we'll have to put our tools aside.

It's like being taught how to make a chair. You have to learn how to use a saw properly, use a hammer properly, files, sandpaper: all kinds of tools. If you bring in an eggbeater, it's not going to be a useful tool. If you bring in a violin, it won't help. Those tools are useful for other purposes.

Sometimes we have a saw already, but its blades are dull. Our hammer has been so worn through that if you hit anything with it really hard, the head would fly off and hurt somebody. In other words, we have some tools that are okay for everyday purposes; some that are dangerous. If you're going to look for true happiness, you have to be willing to inspect and replace your tools for the sake of the Dhamma.

So, when you listen to the Dhamma, remember that you're asking not only, "How does the Buddha describe things?" but, "What kind of description is he replacing?" When he asks a question, what questions is he not asking? This comes under the heading of appropriate attention—how you frame things in the mind. The way you frame things, and the perceptions you use to provide the frame and then to fill the frame, will make a huge difference.

Again, think about languages: Some languages have a very extensive vocabulary for emotions; others have a more scientific vocabulary. It depends on what the language has been used for. Those are the things it will emphasize. So, in terms of the language of the Dhamma, you want to look at things in terms of, one: "What is suffering? Where is the suffering?" And then, two: "What's causing it?" The Buddha points out that you're going to be asking not *who* is causing it, but *what*—what activity? He's not saying whether there is or is not somebody behind the activity, but he wants you to look at the activity directly.

So, if you come to the Dhamma with a very strong sense of, "I'm me, and I'm the kind of person who does this, this way," you have to learn how to put that assumption aside. You're putting it aside not as a bad tool, but just a tool that's used for something else, like an eggbeater. If you're making a chair, you don't want the eggbeater. And eggbeater might be useful for other things, like soufflés, but it's not what you want right now.

The Buddha says that suffering is clinging: clinging to the five aggregates. Okay, you want to figure out what kinds of clinging there are, what kind of aggregates there are, and the different ways you cling to the different aggregates. What kind of activity leads to the clinging? Well, there's craving. What leads to craving? Feeling. The Buddha chases these activities down in dependent co-arising all the way to ignorance.

When people would ask him, "Who's doing the feeling?" He would say, "Don't ask." "Who does the feeling belong to?" "Don't ask." Just look at the process of feeling, and you see it comes from contact; contact depends on the six senses, and so on down the line. He's giving you a framework for looking at things, and the framework is not the world and it's not your self. In fact, it's a framework that describes how you give rise to the concept of *world* based on your six senses, and how you give rise to a concept of *self* based on clinging. That way, you see where these things come from. You see the activities that give rise to them.

As the Buddha said, you can focus on any one of these activities and try to understand where it's coming from, how it's causing suffering, what its allure is—why you like doing it—and then compare the allure with the drawbacks until you really see there's nothing there.

The allure is often just a little tiny, tiny taste. One of the Buddha's images is of a bead of honey on a blade of a knife. He's not denying that the honey is sweet. It is. But it's awfully dangerous. When you see that, then you let go of the activity. And in letting go of that activity, you start sending cracks up through other activities that help to loosen up, on the one hand, your sense of the world and, on the other hand, your sense of your self.

You don't attack those things directly. You attack them by looking at activities, and seeing where all the things you do, desiring to find happiness, are *not* causing happiness. Then you ask yourself, "Well, why? As long as there's an effort being put out, why expend the effort? What's gained?"

Now, if you were to place that question within the context of who you are, you might say, "Well, this affirms who I am." Or, "This is just the way I am." Or, "This is the way the world has to be." Everything gets frozen in place. But if you allow yourself to look at the action simply as an action and analyze it in those terms, as part of a process, you find yourself letting go of the things that otherwise you would have held on to really tightly.

So, when the Buddha gives his teachings like dependent co-arising, the four noble truths, or the three perceptions, they're a form of social conditioning, too. This is why the Forest Tradition never describes them as *ultimate* truths. They're assumptions. They're conventions. We use the Buddha's conventions because they

serve a purpose that our ordinary conventions can't. His perceptions work in a way that our ordinary perceptions don't work. This is how we test them as to whether they really are true Dhamma: Do they work? And do they work for the purpose of an end of suffering?

This is why the word *Dhamma* is closely associated with the word *attha* in Pali: *Attha* means meaning, purpose, benefit. The Dhamma, if it's true Dhamma, serves a benefit, serves a purpose—and that's how you test it. When you're serious about awakening or want to have a taste of the deathless, you want to test these things in this way. As the Buddha said, you want to listen to the true Dhamma from a person of integrity, one who's basically an admirable friend.

The Buddha said that the true Dhamma would disappear not long after he passed away—by which he meant that other versions of Dhamma would get circulated so that the true Dhamma's monopoly on being *the* Dhamma would be called into question. He said it was like counterfeit money: When counterfeit money comes into the market, real money “disappears” because everything becomes suspect. Before there was counterfeit, everybody trusted the money. They could use it as a medium. Nobody had to ask too many questions. But once counterfeit comes in, you have to ask the questions that test: How do you recognize genuine money? What are the reliable tests?

It's the same with the Dhamma: We have to test the Dhamma. The Buddha taught the Kālāmas a series of tests. He taught his stepmother, Gotamī a series of tests. He taught Upāli, the Vinaya expert, a series of tests. In every case, it was: When you put this into practice—and that's what those conventions are meant for, to be put into practice—what are the results?

If a teaching leads to harm, there's something wrong. It's not the genuine article. If it makes you burdensome on other people; if it gets you entangled a lot with other people, it's not the genuine article. If it leads to being unfettered, leads to dispassion—that's it. That's the *attha* by which you recognize the Dhamma.

So, the Buddha never said that all social conventions are bad. After all, language is a convention, and he used language to teach. Names are conventions, and he used them so that people would know who he was talking to, what he was talking about. He used the conventions of the aggregates, the sense media, and the properties to get you to look at what was going on in your experience—not in terms of who you are, although it starts out with who you are, but you begin to realize that your sense of who you are is an action. There are times when it's a skillful sense of self, and other times when it's not a skillful sense of self. Skillful activity / unskillful activity: Thinking this way loosens up your perceptions, so you start looking more and more directly at actions and their results.

This is how you can pry apart your attachments and your clinging in a way that's in line with the Buddha's sense of what's *good enough*. He said he never let himself rest content with skillful qualities until he found the real thing. And that's the attitude he's asking you to take, too.