

In the Elephant's Footprint

May 10, 2022

The Buddha was quite clear about the fact that there are a lot of things in his awakening that he never told anybody else. But when he did talk about his awakening, it's interesting to note that he always focused on one theme, which is the four noble truths. Sometimes he talked about the expansion of the four noble truths into dependent co-arising. But he never mentioned the three characteristics. He didn't awaken to the three characteristics. He awakened to the four noble truths. And from the four noble truths, he was able to awaken to nibbana.

What are the four noble truths about? They're about karma. They're about action: the actions you do that lead to suffering, and the actions you can do that lead to the end of suffering. You have a choice. And the fact that you have a choice is very important.

The Buddha was not the kind of person who would go looking for fights, but if he found that there were people who would teach that there was no choice in the present moment, that the present moment was totally determined by your past karma, or by a creator god, or else it was totally random, he's go and argue with those teachers. He took it that seriously. He told them that if that's what you're teaching, then there's no way to stop being a killer of animals, a stealer of things, one who commits illicit sex, a liar, a drunkard, because it would be all determined by what had happened before, or it would be determined by things that were out of your control.

At the time, there were some Jains who claimed that when they did their austerities, they were burning away their past karma. The proof of it, of course, was the pain they were feeling. So he went to argue with them, too. He said, "How do you know this is past karma that's causing the pain? Have you ever noticed that when you don't do your austerities, there is no pain?" He's pointing to the fact that we make choices in the present moment, and that our choices have power, some of which is felt right in the present moment. Without that power, he said, you could make no sense of a path of practice.

As for the question of who's making the choices, he said, "Put that aside. Focus on the choices. Focus on making them skillful." When he spoke in terms of mundane right view, he would talk in terms of beings doing actions, reaping the results in their actions. That's the kind of view that will continue leading you back to more saṃsāra—good saṃsara, but saṃsara nevertheless.

If you want to get out of that habit, you stop thinking in terms of beings. You look in terms of actions. After all, that was the insight in second knowledge of his awakening, that beings are reborn in line with their actions. That's why there are so many different beings that you can be. But he wasn't interested in who was doing the actions. He was just interested in what the actions were and what were their results. He looked directly at the actions on their own terms.

Which is why when he was speaking in terms of the four noble truths, there's no mention of beings. There's just suffering, the cause of suffering, actions that lead to the end of suffering. And there are duties. The duty with regard to suffering is to comprehend it. The duty with regard to its cause is to abandon it. The duty with regard to the cessation of suffering is to realize it, and you do that by developing the path.

He was able to express this all without reference to their being a being or not being a being. But as you're along the way, there are times when you need to make use of a sense of your self, that you are competent to do this and you'll receive the results of these actions you're doing. Then you can observe what you're doing and improve what you're doing. That involves a very basic sense of self.

That self can take you all the way through the levels of concentration and get you started on discernment, but then you come to a point where you realize that one of the actions you're doing that's causing stress and suffering is clinging to an idea of self. You create a sense of self. The Buddha calls it *ahaṅkāra mamaṅkāra*: "I-making and my-making." You claim to things as you or yours. It's an activity. And as with all activities, the question is, when is it skillful, when is it not? You learn how to create a skillful sense of self that can help you along the path, the sense that you will benefit from this, the sense that you're capable of doing this. Those are skillful selves, and you have to create them.

If you're not used to creating a competent sense of self, you'll have to learn how to do that, because otherwise you just get overwhelmed by the difficulties of the path. If thinking in terms of self gets in the way, you focus back on actions again. Just keep doing what seems to be the most skillful thing. Commit to being as skillful as you can, and then reflect on what you're doing. The commitment is important. You're not just looking at actions willy-nilly, whatever happens to come through the mind or happens to come out in terms of your words or your deeds. If you really want to learn, you try your best to do something skillful. If it doesn't come out skillful, then you can learn from it: what needs to be changed, what needs to be improved. In focusing on the actions in that way, you're staying in line with the terms of the four noble truths.

It was when the Buddha taught the four noble truths to the five brethren that

they gained the Dhamma-eye. Some people say that when you gain the Dhamma-eye, you see there's no self. But that's misinterpreting an experience of cessation. There is a cessation, but that's not quite the right word. It's a state of no perception. You just blank out and you can come out of that with all kinds of assumptions. You saw that there was no self in there, or there was nothing. But that's not the deathless. That's just a sideshow.

What you really see and then come to understand with the arising of the Dhamma-eye is expressed as, "Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation." The important word there is *origination*. The Buddha uses that to describe causation and primarily causes coming out of the mind. You begin to see the extent to which you have been shaping your experience through bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, and mental fabrication. Before, you were doing it in ignorance. When you adopt right view, you start assuming that this is an important aspect of your awareness to know. But with stream entry, you see that it really is. You see how much the fact that you're experiencing the six senses really does depend on your intentions. When you drop your intentions, then you're open to a different dimension.

When you come back from that, it cuts through some fetters of the mind, some of the fetters that tie you to the process of samsara. One of those fetters is self-identity views, in other words, viewing that you either are your aggregates or you own the aggregates, or the aggregates are in you or you're in the aggregates. The mind doesn't think in those terms anymore, because it's had an experience that had nothing to do with any aggregates at all, nothing to do with any activities. But there was a consciousness. The Buddha calls it "consciousness without surface." So your sense of "I am this" or "I own this," gets shaken up. But there's still a lingering sense of "I am."

That's why the Buddha, when he was giving his first two sermons, saved the issue of not-self to the second sermon. This was something he delivered to people who had already gained stream entry. Now, if they'd seen that there was no self in the course of stream entry, he wouldn't have had to give that second sermon. But the fact that they still had that lingering sense of "I am" floating around in an ill-defined way around the aggregates: That was what he had to loosen up. When they could drop that, then they were fully awakened.

The context of all this, of course, is the four noble truths. The idea of letting go of your sense of self as an unskillful activity makes sense only when you realize or have seen that it's passion for your clinging that's causing suffering, and that true happiness can be found by letting go of those clings. One of those clings, of course, is your sense of self. That's when this sense of self, which has been so useful

up to then, finally shows its shortcomings.

So make use of a skillful sense of self as you follow the path.

I've heard some people say that the self is a pitiful thing that's incapable of doing anything really skillful. That's because they haven't trained their sense of self to be skillful. It can be trained. You go with it as far as it can take you, and when it can take you no further, that's when you let it go. But don't throw it away beforehand.

Ajaan Lee says that people throw away their sense of self before they're ready let go like a pauper. They haven't developed the qualities inside that would lead to the deathless. They just say, "Well, these things are not-self, so I should let them go." They don't develop their aggregates.

After all, the path is composed of aggregates. You see this most clearly in right concentration. You've got the form of the body. You've got the feeling of pleasure that comes from focusing on the breath. You've got the perception of the breath that helps you hold it in mind. It helps to use the perception of the breath as a whole-body process. That allows the sense of ease and well-being to spread through the body. It's a useful perception. Directed thought and evaluation are your fabrications. The intentions that hold you in the higher levels of jhana are also fabrications. You're also conscious of these things. So there are the five aggregates in the path, which means you don't want to throw away your aggregates too quickly. You don't want to throw away your sense of self too quickly. These things have their uses. Without them, you couldn't get anywhere.

You take the four noble truths as your basic framework for understanding what's going on. As for the three characteristics or the three perceptions, you learn to see where these things fit into those truths and their duties. The duty with regard to the cause of suffering is to abandon it. You abandon passion for the cause. You also abandon passion for the clinging. One way to get past passion for these things is to see their drawbacks, and that's when the Buddha would have you pull out those three perceptions.

But the four noble truths come first, in line with the first two sermons. The first sermon was about the four noble truths. The second one is about the three characteristics or the three perceptions. The first forms the framework. As Ven. Sāriputta later said, it's the four noble truths that form the framework for all skillful dhammas. In the same way that the footprint of an elephant can contain the footprints of all the other animals that walk on earth, the four noble truths contain all skillful dhammas.

So if you want to understand skillful dhammas and their role in the path, always refer things back to the four noble truths and their duties. Get things in the

right context. Then you can really understand them, how they relate to the truths that the Buddha awakened to. There are so many issues that he chose not to address because they don't fit in with the four noble truths. There are so many things he chose not to talk about because they don't fit in with the four noble truths. So if you find yourself wandering off in questions that the Buddha would put aside, you've basically left the four noble truths. You've left that framework—and you're free to leave it. Nobody's forcing you to go back. But if you want to see things in a way that leads to awakening, you get back inside the four noble truths and let them be your guide.