Make a Difference

April 9, 2025

When you first hear the Four Noble Truths, you’ll have a sense of conviction in the fact that they are true. The proper response is to see them as an opportunity to make a difference. You realize you’ve been acting in ways that lead to suffering, but you don’t have to continue in those ways. So the bhutasa does not simply teach you to practice acceptance. You look at your actions and you realize they’re not acceptable. Something has to be done. This is why what follows on right view and the standard descriptions is right resolve. The resolve to think in ways and act in ways that will lead to happiness, that will lead away from suffering. And you realize that it has to start with the mind, because after all, the cause of suffering is in the mind. Things have to be done to change the way you think. So you focus on three things. Renunciation, non-ill-will, and harmlessness. Renunciation here means putting aside all your thoughts about sensuality. Your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures. Suddenly you’d like it like this, you’d like it like that. No, you’d like it some other way. You can think for hours in these ways, but you realize it’s going to lead to more suffering. So you want to put that kind of thinking away. Think in terms of non-ill-will. You think of all the cases where you would like to see justice done, you’d like to see somebody punished. And you realize that’s going to lead to more suffering. Not only for the person you want to punish, but also for you. So you try to develop goodwill and equanimity instead. You don’t have to like the people who are misbehaving, but you just wish them well. If they’re behaving in ways that are really unskillful, you hope that they’ll see the error of their ways. Start acting in ways that would lead to the end of suffering. And if there’s anything you can do to help in that area, you’d be happy to help. But you certainly don’t want to get in the way of their true well-being. From the harmfulness. There are times when you treat people in a poor way. Not so much that you have ill-will about them, it’s just you dismiss them. They don’t count in your eyes. You have to have compassion. Because if you act in ways that are harmful, even without the ill-will, you’re going to suffer as a result. So you have to think about the well-being of those who might be suffering. And again, if there’s anything you can do to help, you’d be happy to help. Try to develop these qualities of mind. The Buddha compares this to being a cowherd. Any thoughts that go up in terms of sensuality, ill-will, harmfulness, you beat them back. Just as a cowherd would beat back the cows during the rainy season when the rice is growing, for fear that the cows might get into the rice. And then there’d be trouble. So you have to replace these thoughts with better thoughts. Thoughts of renunciation, non-ill-will, harmlessness. And those are exemplified in getting the mind into concentration. There’s a very clear connection between right resolve and right concentration. One in the Buddhist analysis of what counts as mundane right resolve and transcendent right resolve. Transcendent right resolve, he says, is any directed thought evaluation that helps get the mind to settle down. And the definition of right concentration says you’ve put aside all thoughts of sensuality. You’re secluded from thoughts that are unskillful. That’s the embodiment of right resolve. And as the Buddha says elsewhere, that right resolve, skillful resolves, find their highest expression in the first jhana. When you’re directing your thoughts to the breath, you’re directing your thoughts to whatever your topic of concentration might be. And you’re trying to maintain them there. But then he also says you go beyond skillful resolves. That’s when you get the mind into the second jhana. You’ve done your work in adjusting the mind, you’ve done your work in adjusting the breath, and they fit. And all you need to keep the mind with the breath is just the perception of breath, or the perception of oneness with the breath. And this is what the Buddha said. It’s like going even beyond being a cowherd anymore. You don’t even have to be the cowherd who’s aware of the cows wandering around. You’ve gone beyond cows entirely. This is the state in which the Buddha said you’re focused on the body in and of itself, or the feelings, or whatever your concentration object may be. But you’re not thinking thoughts about the object, and you’re certainly not thinking thoughts about anything else. You’re getting the mind still. But it’s only when the mind is still that you can really see it, what’s going on inside. Otherwise you’re like a person who’s trying to find where the mice are on the wall. And you’re humming a tune to yourself, and you’ve got the refrigerator on, you’ve got the stereo on, you’ve got the TV on, the radio’s blaring. There’s all that noise. You’re not going to hear the noise of the mice. The TV is saying good things, helpful things. You’ve got talks of Dhamma going on. Still, it’s making a lot of noise. This is when you put aside all the things that you’ve studied and learned. You just get the mind really, really still. This is a principle you see throughout the forest tradition. People who have studied the various mahas, as they would call them in Thailand, the monks who had studied enough of the Pali, they’d pass three out of the nine exams, and they got a title, “Maha,” which means “great.” And then “Maha” would come to see Ajahn Mun, and he would say, “Put all your knowledge in a trunk and seal it.” And now you’re going to learn directly from your breath. Now you’re going to learn directly from your mind right here, right now. And that requires that the mind get quiet. But for the mind to stay there, to be willing to stay there, there has to be a sense of well-being. This is why we have the directive thought and evaluation in the beginning, to get the mind happy to be here, to peel away any thoughts that would pull you away, that would want to go away, and to provide you with a sense of well-being, a sense of pleasure, a sense of rapture even. Ultimately, you’re going to get to a point where the mind feels very equanimous about things, but it’s the equanimity that comes from being well-fed. The Buddha never teaches equanimity on its own. It’s always in the context of either the pleasure that comes from gaining insights, or the pleasure that comes from getting the mind to settle down. The pleasure there is both physical and mental. He talks about how bodily discomforts grow calm. The mind is happy to be here. And from that state of well-being, then you get the mind to be equanimous. You try to go around and put aside all pleasures and all pains. The mind gets hungry after a while, and it starts doing strange things when it’s hungry. So settle down with a sense of well-being. Then you can see more happiness. There are subtle areas of suffering in the mind. The Buddha doesn’t call it suffering at this stage. He calls it disturbance. Dharata is the Pali term. If you want to see the subtle stuff, you’ve got to get very, very still. That’s how Right Resolve leads to Right Concentration in a way that goes beyond Right Resolve, but doesn’t abandon the purpose of Right Resolve, which is to make a difference. You make a difference in the mind when you get it to stay with one thing, and it’s not wandering around. Even when it wanders around with skillful thoughts, there’s a difference in the mind that thinks skillful thoughts from one that thinks unskillful thoughts. So the real difference comes when you get the mind quiet. That gives you an entirely new relationship to your thoughts. You’re going to stand outside of the more clearly, more easily, and you’re in a better position to pass judgment on them. We are so often that we’re not supposed to be passing judgment. Well, that idea does not come from the Buddha. Wisdom, discernment for him, is a matter of passing judgment. What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? It comes down to what actions are worth doing, which actions are not. So we’re passing judgment trying to make a difference, based on our understanding of what the Buddha said about suffering and its cause, and the way to put an end to that cause. So we’re making a good difference. A difference that will have a good impact on us and on the people around us.

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