

Dhamma is Timeless

November 29, 2020

The Dhamma doesn't change. That's one of the reasons why it's said to be *akaliko*, timeless. The Buddha was wise enough to see what in his mind was universal. That's one of the reasons why Buddhism was the first world religion. It didn't have anything to do with any tribe or somebody's vision of a spirit who came and spoke especially to one group of people. It focuses on a universal problem and a universal solution. The problem is the suffering we cause ourselves. And the principles by which we do that were the same in India in the Buddha's time as they are now. So even though the Dhamma may not have lots of new things to tell you with the passing of time, that's actually one of its virtues. Its lessons stay the same.

I appreciated this when I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, that once you learned the principles, you could live by them. He was the sort of person who wasn't going to change things just to please people—and it wasn't that people weren't making demands. We think that it's only in the West that people talk about changes in the Dhamma. But it's been happening in Thailand and other Asian countries for centuries—"this has to change, that has to change"—to the point where the traditions of Thai and Laotian Buddhism were so far removed from the Dhamma that when Ajaan Mun was trying to go back to the original principles, they accused him of being out of line.

The image given in the Canon is of a drum. At first it sounds resonant. It's made out of wood, and the sound goes far. But then a crack develops in the wood, so you insert a peg in the crack. Another crack, another peg; another crack, another peg, until finally the drum is nothing but pegs. When you beat it, you can barely hear it. In other words, the changes that are sometimes brought to the Dhamma may seem to be a good fix for the time being, but then it turns out that they don't really have the same impact, they don't really have the same power as what the Buddha originally taught.

So we have to keep coming back to the same old principles all over again, to the same problem—the suffering we're causing ourselves—and to the same solution, the noble eightfold path. The Buddha calls these truths noble because, as he said, they are factual, true, and not otherwise than what they seem.

There's another passage in the Canon saying that the truths are noble because they're taught by *the* noble one, i.e., the Buddha. Some people have said that in that case, they must be true only for noble people. They're not true for us. But

that's not so. They're true for everybody. As the Buddha said, they're categorical, which means they're always true, always beneficial, no matter where you go. There are only two of his teachings that he said were categorical: the four noble truths and the teaching that skillful qualities should be developed, and unskillful ones should be abandoned.

The two principles come together, because the noble truths are not just ideas that sit there. Each truth has a duty. The cause of suffering, the cause of stress, is something that should be abandoned; the path is something that should be developed. So the four truths take those two principles of skillful and unskillful qualities, and divide them up into cause and effect. The cause of suffering is something you abandon, the suffering itself is something you want to comprehend. The path is something you develop. The cessation of suffering that's found at the end of the path is something you want to realize for yourself.

So these are noble duties. And one of the reasons the truths are noble is because they make us noble. Usually, when you look at your suffering, all you can think of is to try to push it away, push it away, and then you hold on to your craving at the same time you're trying to push away results of the craving. There's nothing really noble about that attitude. What's noble is when you realize that "The way I feed, the way I cling to things, that's the suffering. I've got to do something about that." That attitude is a noble one. You're pulling away from your old feeding habits. You're taking a good look at them. It's in adopting that attitude that you get on the right path. Your search for happiness becomes a noble search.

So always keep these principles in mind. These are the ones that make sure that your path is on the path—let's put it that way. What you're doing is actually leading to where you want it to go, and not wandering someplace else.

We chant every night: The Dhamma is well taught. Timeless. To be seen here and now. And it's the same Dhamma, every day, every day, every day. The problem is, sometimes our attitude is in line with it, and sometimes it's not. You become mature in the Dhamma when you realize you've begun to stray off the path. Then you can bring yourself back. If we had lots of different Dhammas, it'd be hard to do that. With today's Dhamma you might like this particular style, and another day, another particular style.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha said that when counterfeit Dhamma appears, the true Dhamma disappears. The concept that there is one true Dhamma is gone because there are lots of different clamoring voices. This is one of problems of living in a time when the true Dhamma has disappeared in that sense. You can always find a version of the Dhamma that will please whatever

defilement you have. But when you're honest with yourself and you look at what gets developed in the mind as you follow a particular interpretation or as you latch on to particular idea, you can begin to gain a sense of what actually is the true Dhamma. Then the true Dhamma is still there.

The analogy the Buddha gives is with genuine money and counterfeit money. When counterfeit money floods the market, genuine money disappears. It's still there, it's just that people get very dubious. But there are tests for genuine money that counterfeit doesn't pass. And the same with the Dhamma: Remember the principles the Buddha taught to his stepmother. Does this Dhamma lead to dispassion? Does it lead to being unfettered? Does it rouse your energy? Does it make you content with external things? Does it make you shed things that are unskillful? Does it make you unburdensome? Does it make you modest, unentangled? If it does, that's the Dhamma. The genuine Dhamma will pass the test, it's simply that we have to make ourselves good judges, judges that we can rely on.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate to develop a lot of mindfulness and alertness. The alertness is important, because it's so easy to lie to yourself. That was one of Ajaan Chah's comments: One of the first things you notice as you really start watching the mind is how much it lies to itself. But we can get past that.

That's the meaning of that image the Buddha had about the mind being luminous while the defilements come and go, just like the Sun. The Sun is luminous. Even when the Sun is covered by clouds, the Sun itself is still luminous. There is a quality of the mind that can know even when the defilements are there. "Luminous" here doesn't mean it's pure, and doesn't mean we're already awakened, but it does mean this knowing quality. You can observe. You can see for yourself what you're doing. You can catch the mind, if your mindfulness and alertness are continuous: You can catch the mind when it's lying to itself.

So we develop these qualities that enable us to rely on ourselves to be good judges. Of course, as we develop the qualities to be good judges, we also develop the qualities to be good Dhamma practitioners. Every day, make sure that your intention is in line with the Dhamma, whose intention is for freeing the mind.

Look for ways in which the mind ties itself down. How does it do it? Through its passions. We keep running up against this principle that the things to which we cling most, the things we're most passionate about, are the things that make us suffer. Those are the things that tie us down. So, of course it's going to go against the grain to practice. But there's a part of the mind that realizes that not practicing goes very strongly against another grain, which is the part of the mind that really wants to be free, that's tired of the ways in which it has been making

itself suffer. That's the side of the mind you want to encourage. You want to make sure that it doesn't get buried under all the other voices in the mind.

So try to make your practice timeless. That's the only way you're going to know the timeless Dhamma.

Ajaan Fuang had that comment one time, in one of the few Dhamma talks he gave that was recorded, to a large group of people that he had never met before. He wanted to give them a message that would stay with them. And this was the message: that as we live our lives, as long as we keep dividing our time up into different times, we'll never know the timeless Dhamma. At the same time, we have to remember that we don't have much time. So if you want to know the timeless Dhamma, you've got to make your practice timeless. And have a very strong sense that you've got to use right now, you've got to do it right now. You can't put it off.

Ajaan Maha Boowa once made a comment that people who think that rebirth would be a good thing don't really understand rebirth. It's scary! Everything gets pulled away from you—all the things you depended on in this lifetime—and you may have some good that you've done, but you don't know what karma you've got from the past. The possibility for falling is very strong. But we do have this life right here, right now; we do have this opportunity right here, right now. When we think of the word timeless, we tend to visualize a long stretch of time, away from right here, right now. But no, timelessness is right here, right now. Those two things are strongly connected: that you've got to practice timelessly right now. If you're at work in the kitchen, you're practicing right now; if you're at work in the orchard, you're practicing right now. Whatever you're doing as you go through the day, make it a right-now kind of practice. That's how it becomes timeless.

It is in the timelessness of the Dhamma that the noble quality of the Dhamma comes out. It really does raise the level of your mind. It pulls you away from your old feeding habits, from your old attachments, and it gives you freedom of a very noble sort.