

Right View

November 20, 2007

The discourse we chanted just now—“Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion”—starts with the whole noble eightfold path and then goes into right view. And that’s all it discusses in detail: right view, going through the four noble truths. Simply listening to this talk on right view, one of the Five Brethren had his first taste of the deathless—or, as they say in the text, he experienced “the arising of the Dhamma Eye.”

So right view is important. As one analysis of the path says, three qualities circle around every factor of the path. One is right view. The second is right effort. The third is right mindfulness. So try to make sure that these three qualities are circling around your practice right now.

There are basically four truths covered by right view. First is the truth of suffering or stress; *dukkha* is the Pali term. Sometimes we’re told that the first truth is that “life is suffering” or “everything is suffering,” but that’s not the case. The Buddha basically said that “there is suffering.” It’s one of four things you’re going to encounter in life that you should pay attention to. You could argue with the idea that life is suffering, but you can’t argue with the idea that there is suffering. You see it all around you. You see it inside you as well. The Buddha’s simply asking you to take it seriously.

To take suffering seriously means that you should learn how to comprehend it. To do that, you have to put yourself in a position where you can watch it, to see how it comes, how it goes, what comes and goes along with it. The coming and going along with it: That’s essentially what the word *samudaya*—usually translated as “cause” or “origination”—means. You want to see that every time there’s real suffering in the mind, it’s accompanied by craving—any one of three kinds of craving to be specific: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.

Craving for sensuality is easy enough to explain: the desire to have sensual desires. That’s one of the most interesting parts of the analysis: that sensual attachment is not so much to ‘things out there’; we’re more attached to our *plans* for things out there, our scheming for things out there, for pleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. We spend a lot more time planning and working toward these things than we do in actually tasting them.

Often the taste is very fleeting. Think of the food we eat. Exactly how long does it really taste good in your mouth? Look at that little burst of taste, and then think of how much work goes into buying the food, preparing the food, cleaning up after the meal. Of course we do it for more than just the taste; we do it to keep the body going. But, there’s an awful lot of energy expended in the idea, “Let’s make this taste really good”—and then it’s gone.

We’re actually more attached to our plans for these things, our desires for these things, than we are to the things themselves. It’s easy enough to replace a desire for one sensual pleasure with a desire for another sensual pleasure. It’s hard to drop our desire for sensual desire entirely. That’s one of the causes of suffering.

Another cause is craving for becoming. You want to become something, to take on a particular identity, within a particular world of experience. We choose our worlds, you know: the context in which we see ourselves, the context in which we move and exert an influence. These two things are entwined: both the world in which we have a self and the sense of self that functions within that world. Sometimes the world is on the sensual level. Sometimes it's on the level of form, as when we're meditating and fully inhabiting the form of the body. Sometimes it's on the formless level—any abstraction, any formless experience, anything without a form, as when we experience space in our meditation, or a sense of formless “knowing.” And again, we tend to go from one of these types of becoming to another, to another, to another. This is what the wandering on is all about. We go from one *bhava*, one state of becoming, to another. These are the locations that the mind focuses on. And we suffer from this because none of these locations can last; none of these positions can last. Whatever we latch onto as a self, it just keeps melting away. The world around us just keeps melting away.

Then there's craving for non-becoming, the desire to destroy whatever you've got, whatever you identify yourself with. Or you want to destroy the world around you. It's unpleasant. Outrageous. You don't like it. You want to get rid of it, which can either be an external destructive urge or an internal destructive urge. Paradoxically, this type of craving leads to becoming as well. Why is that? Because in taking on the identity of the Destroyer, you're assuming another identity. In taking delight in the idea of destruction, you're watering a sense of identity; you're watering a sense of becoming.

The Buddha's image is of a seed planted in the ground. The seed is your consciousness. The ground is your kamma, past and present, as it's manifesting right now. Then there's the delight in doing something with these things, either creating something out of them or destroying them. All of that counts as a cause of suffering. It may sound pretty abstract, but as you get to know the mind, you begin to sense the movement as it's going in one of these directions or another: toward becoming or non-becoming. In one sense we're in a double bind; the desire to get rid of becoming itself is a way of creating becoming—but this is where the Buddha's genius as a strategist comes in.

He says that you go beyond becoming not by destroying becoming but by learning how to create new forms of becoming that are more skillful, particularly the “becoming” of concentration, getting the mind to settle down and be in one spot. As long as you're going to have a location, develop a solid steady location within the form of the body, because it's a blameless way of giving rise to happiness. Then, when you can see things clearly from this location, you can simply let the processes of becoming go.

Sometimes you hear about the dangers of being stuck on concentration. But if you look through the texts, the Buddha talks about them only in very rare cases. He mentions the dangers of delighting in the state of equanimity or of not wanting to go beyond a particular state of concentration, but these are pretty harmless, pretty minor compared to the dangers of staying stuck in sensuality.

The Buddha gave long, long discourses about all the suffering and conflict that come from sensual craving. You have to work hard to gain what you crave and sometimes your efforts are fruitless. Or, even when they do bear fruit in what you want, those things don't really stay with you. As the Buddha says, sometimes fire burns them, water washes them away, thieves or kings will make off with them—I like that: pairing thieves with kings—or hateful heirs make off with them. It's because of sensual craving that there are conflicts within the family, conflicts among

nations. This is why we go to war. I don't think that anyone has ever gone to war over attachment to jhana, attachment to concentration. But we kill, steal, have illicit sex, lie to one another, indulge in intoxicants, all because of sensual craving, sensual attachment—none of which happens because of our attachment to jhana. The only danger of being stuck on jhana is that as long as you're stuck, you don't gain awakening.

So jhana is a relatively blameless form of happiness. It gives us nourishment on the path and at the same time is a very transparent form of becoming. We watch ourselves doing it because we have to do it so carefully. This is where the mindfulness comes in. That's one of the elements in the Canon's definition of mindfulness: being very meticulous. The more meticulous you are, the better you remember things. You need to be very meticulous in keeping something in mind in order to maintain your concentration. This is one of the functions of right mindfulness. Once you've entered into a skillful mental state, mindfulness enables you to keep remembering to stay there. If you're meticulous in doing this, you begin to see more clearly exactly what's involved in getting the mind to settle down. This is why jhana is a transparent form of becoming: As you watch it, you begin to understand what becoming is all about. You can begin to identify which part of the practice is based on old kamma, which part is based on new kamma, which part is based on your present consciousness and all the other things that go along with it, and which part of it is watered by the sense of delight.

So the trick here is that once you've learned how to do this, the Buddha says, you learn how to see things simply as they have come to be. In other words, you just look at what past kamma is being offered up to you right now. Our instinctive reaction is to make something out of it, to do something with it. But to watch it simply as it comes into being without trying to create something out of it, without trying to destroy it, without even taking delight in the equanimity of watching it: That's hard.

It's pretty easy to get into a state of equanimity just watching these things, but it takes a lot of insight to realize that equanimity itself is a kind of doing. It's a way of creating something out of your experience, something you can delight in. So this goes deeper than just plain equanimity. The Buddha says you have to learn how not to make anything out of anything; even out of the jhana, even out of your strong concentration. When you can do that, you can break through to the deathless.

So instead of just operating on the desire to get rid of things, we first develop a different kind of desire: the desire to learn how to create something really skillful out of them—which includes learning to develop skillful desires before you ultimately let them go. This is a basic pattern in the Buddha's path. The fourth noble truth is to abandon unskillful states and to give rise to skillful states in the mind so you can understand what's involved in giving rise to a state. Then you get more sensitive to exactly which part in the present moment is the given and which part's being added. In general, we're very ignorant of what we're adding to things. Yet even our normal experience of space and time is something that has already been added to.

The aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness come in a potential form and then—based on which things we're interested in, which things we want to create, which things we want to destroy—we actually create our experience of the present out of these different potentials. So we need to do a lot of digging down into our experience of the present moment to see what's just the potential without anything added at all, not even equanimity. This requires that we get the mind really still, really alert, and really interested in what it's doing.

This is how right view hovers around the meditation. Right effort and right mindfulness hover along with it. You try to give rise to what's skillful no matter what the situation: That's the right effort. Right mindfulness means being mindful to give rise to what's skillful, to abandon what's unskillful and—once you've entered into what's skillful—being mindful to stay with it. It's all very proactive, but it's proactive in a transparent way.

This is why, when you begin to delve into right view, you realize that it covers the whole path. It's not just a matter of understanding something in an abstract way. It's learning how to see things in a new light and then acting on what you've seen in an appropriate way. It's not just a theory; it's a guide to action.

And while we're sitting here getting the mind to settle down and be still, Ajaan Lee's image is that it's like raising a chicken that lays eggs. The eggs stand for becoming. You eat some of the eggs to keep yourself nourished and you take the other eggs apart to see what eggs are made of, what their parts are. Or you watch how they develop. The analogy breaks down there, but ultimately you get to the point where you don't need the eggs any more, either for the nourishment or for the purpose of your investigation.

That's when you put the path aside. Even right view gets put aside. That's when you experience the noble truth of cessation: total freedom from craving, and as a result, total freedom from suffering and stress. But in the meantime, you want to make sure that right view is always there, hovering around your meditation to keep it on course and to make sure that what you're doing is transparent to you. That's how the process of becoming in concentration leads to something that goes beyond becoming, where there's no suffering at all.

And that, as the Buddha said, is the end of the problem.