The Dhamma Eye

July 29, 2007

Let's sit and meditate. Focus on your breath. Know when the breath is coming in, know when it's going out. And notice if it's comfortable. If it's not comfortable, you can change. If it feels too long or too short, too heavy or too light, you can change it so that it feels better: feels good coming in, feels good going out.

You're focused on the breath so you can anchor the mind in the present moment, because if you want to understand your own mind, you have to watch it in the present moment. If you try to watch it in the past or in the future, what are you going to watch? You watch your memories, you watch your anticipations, and you don't actually see it in action. Your memories might be false, and as for your anticipations, who knows what's going to happen in the future? All we can do is guess.

So you have to be able to watch your mind in the present moment, and the first step in learning how to watch it is to get anchored here. When you're with the breath, you know you're in the present, because there is no past breath you can watch, no future breath you can watch, but you *can* watch the breath right now. As you learn how to watch the breath more and more steadily, it gets easier and easier to watch your own mind to see what's going on there, because what do we have here? There's a lot of activity in the mind, many layers of activity. But when you watch it consistently enough, you began to peel it away layer by layer by layer, until finally you get something that's really special. That's what the Buddha's story is all about.

As he said, when he was a young man, he looked around at all the pleasures he had and he realized that those pleasures would eventually grow old, get ill, pass away. The people he loved, even the things he liked, would grow old in their way, get decrepit, and then finally he'd have to throw them away. Even if they didn't get thrown away before he died, eventually he'd end up dying. So he wondered: Is there a happiness that's deathless, that doesn't die, that's not affected by the death of the body? In other words, something that doesn't change at all? He realized that by staying at home, he wouldn't have time or the opportunity to really look deeply enough into the mind to see this.

So he left home and went out into the wilderness. At first, he practiced with a couple of teachers who said they taught the deathless, but he wasn't satisfied with their teachings. Then he tried six years of austerities, depriving himself of food,

even stopping his breath to see if the pain that came from that would show the mind something special. There was the idea in India at the time that pleasure was bad, therefore, pain must be good for you. He tried that for six years and realized that pain wasn't good for him, either. It didn't help him reach the deathless.

That's when he remembered an incident from his childhood, when he was sitting under a tree while his father was ploughing, and his mind naturally entered a state of solid and very pleasurable concentration. It felt good just to be sitting there, very quiet, very still. He thought to himself, "Could this be the way to true happiness?" And he realized it could be. But he'd been starving himself so much that he didn't have the strength even to get his mind still that way. So he went back to eating food.

There was a group of younger monks, called the five brethren, who had been staying with them, hoping that if he'd starved himself to the point where he found something really special, they'd be the first to know. When they saw him eating again, they got disgusted with him and left.

So now the Buddha was on his own. He ate enough food until he finally had enough strength to get the mind into good, solid concentration. So he sat under the Bodhi tree on the night of the full moon of Visakha, which is in May, resolving that he wouldn't get up until he found the deathless.

Then toward morning, he realized that the real problem in the mind wasn't things outside, it was the mind's own misunderstandings of what's going on inside. In particular, not understanding why there is suffering, what the mind does to create suffering, and if there's a way to practice that puts an end to it. These were what he called the four noble truths: suffering, its cause, the cessation of suffering, and the path to its cessation. When he clearly saw those noble truths, he saw further than that each truth had a duty. When you experience suffering, the duty is to try to comprehend it, to understand it, to figure out what it is and why it's there. When you run across the cause, the duty was to let it go. He saw that the cause is craving and ignorance, so those were the things he had to let go. As for the cessation of suffering, that's something to realize. And the path to its cessation is something to be developed.

Now, all these activities are skills. They take time. In the Buddha's case, he did it very quickly in one night, but for most of us, it takes time to develop these skills, to learn how to comprehend our suffering, let go of its cause, realize its cessation, and develop the path to its cessation. But ultimately he finally reached the point where he fully realized the cessation of suffering from having fully comprehended suffering, having totally let go of its cause and fully developed the path. That, he said, was when he found the deathless inside. In other words, his mind stopped

creating suffering. When the suffering began to fall away, what was left was something that didn't die.

The story goes that for the next seven weeks he just sat there under the tree, experiencing the bliss of release. Another version of the story said that he would get up each week and go sit someplace else nearby. All and all, he sat in that area for seven weeks, which by our calendar would've ended last week. Then the question came into his mind: Now that he had discovered this very subtle teaching, should he teach it?

His first thought was that it was awfully subtle. He wondered if there'd be anyone who would understand and he almost gave up the desire to teach. This was when one of the Brahmas, a deva up in the highest levels of heaven, realized that this would disastrous. The Buddha went through all that trouble to gain awakening, yet if he didn't teach the deathless, then nobody would know. Nobody would benefit. So the Brahma went down and invited him to teach. He said, "There are some people with little dust in their dyes. They'll understand." So the Buddha, now with special powers of knowing, surveyed the world and realized that that was the case. There would be people who would understand. So he resolved to teach.

The first people he thought of were the two teachers he had studied with way back when he first went into the wilderness. Then he realized that both of them had recently died and gone to the formless realms, where they couldn't hear him teach. Next he thought about the five young monks who had stayed with him when he was practicing austerities, and realized that they were off in Benares, which was a good long walk away.

So he spent the next week walking. In our calendar that would have taken from last Sunday to this Sunday. This Sunday he had arrived just outside Benares and found them. At first, they weren't willing to listen to him. They said, "You've been eating food. What could you understand when, after all those years of austerities, you didn't reach the deathless? How could you reach the deathless after you eat food?" He said it didn't have anything to do with eating food or not eating food. He said, "I've found the deathless, I'll teach it to you." Again, they refused to listen to him.

Finally, he said, "Look, have I ever made a claim like this before?" As they reflected, they realized he was very truthful person. So they were willing to listen.

That's when he taught them what we call the Dhamma Wheel. He started by explaining that austerity was not the path, and sensual indulgence was not the path, either. What was the path was the middle way, starting with understanding the truths about suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. The

reason it's called a wheel is because each of those truths has a duty, and then there's the stage of having completed the duty, so you have three stages altogether: One is understanding what the truth is; two, realizing it has a duty; and three, realizing that you've completed the duty. So you have four truths, three levels of knowing. Back in those days, when they put different variables like this against one another and listed all the permutations, they called it a wheel. That's why our Dhamma Wheel here has twelve spokes. Three times four is twelve.

As the Buddha explained this, one of the monks, Kondañña, gained what they call the Dhamma eye. He actually saw the deathless at his own mind. It's expressed in the phrase: *yankiñci samudaya-dhammam sabbantam nirodha-dhammanti:* Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to passing away.

Now, that sounds kind of ordinary. Everybody can see things arising and passing away, but this kind of realization comes naturally to a mind that's actually seen the deathless—in other words, something that doesn't arise, and doesn't pass away. When you look back at everything else you've experienced, that's how you explain all the things you've experienced up to that point—things that arise from a cause in the mind are all subject to passing away—because this is something that doesn't arise, doesn't pass away.

This event proved that the Buddha could teach the Dhamma to someone else and gain results. There was someone, at least one person, with little dust in his eyes. That's why they call it the dustless, stainless Dhamma eye: no stains on it, no dust, so it saw the deathless clearly.

Now, that wasn't a total awakening. The story goes that for the next few days, the Buddha taught more Dhamma to the other monks until all five of them had gained the Dhamma eye, and then he taught them the discourse on not-self. That's when all of them finally gained total release.

The analogy of the Dhamma eye is like standing at the edge of a well, looking down and seeing that there's clear cool water in the well. You know it's there, but you haven't reached the water totally. Total liberation is like jumping down into the well and being totally immersed in the water. You're totally immersed in the deathless. That's full awakening. But with the arising of the Dhamma eye, that's how you know for sure that what the Buddha said was true: There is a deathless dimension, and you can touch it through your own efforts.

So that's what we are practicing for here, trying to peel away all the levels of activity, all the levels of suffering and stress in the mind, to see if there is something inside that doesn't change, to prove to ourselves whether what the Buddha taught was true or not, whether there really is something that doesn't die, and whether we can reach it through our own efforts.

This is an important part of the realization: It's not just something that comes floating by. You have to work toward it. There is the path toward the end of suffering, which is why the Buddha started his first talk after explaining the two wrong paths, in other words, self-torture and sensual indulgence, and the middle path. There is a path to the end of suffering, he said, that leads to total freedom, leads to knowledge.

So it's something you can do. This is why we sit here meditating, because by developing good qualities in the mind, we're developing the path, we're following one of the duties that the Buddha realized: to develop concentration, develop discernment, develop mindfulness, your ability to keep something in mind, and to develop alertness, your ability to notice what you're doing and the results of what you're doing.

The more you work on these things, the closer you get to the end of suffering, the closer you get to experience what the Buddha said is deathless.

All the good things you do, as one of the Thai ajaans once said, start with generosity and respect, and those two qualities of generosity and respect carry you through all the way to the end, because the realization of the deathless finally means that you learn to let go of everything you've been holding on to. You held on because you thought you had to, but then when you learn how to let go, you realize that you're letting down a huge burden.

It's an extension of generosity. When we're generous with our things, sometimes our mind feels a little bit hesitant to give things away. We're afraid we're going to miss what we've got there, but then when we learn to give it away, we realize a sense of lightness, a sense of well-being and a spaciousness that arise in your mind. We realize that when we give away, we don't lose. We actually gain.

And it's the same with unskillful qualities of the mind. We hold on to these things. We don't realize they're unskillful. Often we like them, we identify with them, but then we learn to realize that our greed, anger, and delusion are defiling the mind, they're standing in the way of experience of the deathless, they're the dust in our eyes, they keep us from seeing the deathless, so we work on the qualities of alertness and mindfulness that allow us to see through these things and get beyond them.

Every good quality you develop in the mind is part of the path. It's taking you closer and closer to the deathless, something that doesn't die, something that doesn't disappoint, because once you've found it, it's there. You know it'll never leave you.

That's what we're working toward. That's why we meditate here, so that we can someday have the vision of the Dhamma. The Dhamma eye will be dustless

and stainless within us, and we'll see whether what the Buddha said was true or not, whether there really is that deathless dimension.

That's his challenge. That's the challenge of his story. As we sit here and meditate, we're trying to meet that challenge to see whether or not it's true.