

A Graduated Discourse

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If you take a class on Buddhism in a college or read an introductory book on Buddhism, they often start with the four noble truths. And when the Buddha taught the five brethren that's what he started with, too.

But with a lot of people, he didn't. He saw that their minds had to be readied, prepared to accept the four noble truths and work with them in a way that actually got results. His way of preparing them was something called the graduated discourse. It's reported several times in the Canon but it's never transcribed. In other words, we don't know exactly what he said. All we have is a series of topics. But when you read the series of topics, you get an idea of what the Buddha's doing.

He starts out with generosity, talking about how good it is to be generous. Of course, this means generous not only with your material wealth, but also with your time, with your concern for other people, with your respect, with your forgiveness.

There's that phrase we had just now in the chant, "respect in welcoming guests." It relates to the fact that the Buddha said if you're stingy with the Dhamma, there's no way you're going to get into right concentration. So when people come here, we're happy to share the Dhamma with them as a way of opening our own minds. After all, the benefits of generosity are both social and individual: social in the sense of how other people respond to your generosity; individual in the quality of the mind that you develop. It's like living in a very large house as opposed to living in a narrow, little apartment. There's a lot of space in a generous mind.

If the Buddha saw that the person listening to the talk was receptive and had some experience with generosity, he'd go on to virtue: abstaining from killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, and taking intoxicants. Virtue, too, is gift, a gift of safety. He'd talk about the benefits of virtue both, again, social and individual: social in the sense that you're creating a safer world for yourself and others; individual in that being a person with principles is a solid reason for sense of self-esteem.

If the Buddha saw that he was talking with people who didn't have much experience with these things, sometimes he'd stop there. It's a principle throughout the Canon that developing right view is not just a matter of thinking about right views. It's also a matter of having some practical experience in putting them into practice, engaging in some of the actions the Buddha recommends. You

can have mundane right view, but you're not ready for transcendent right view until you have some time spent in practicing right action, right speech, right mindfulness, and attempting right concentration. That way, right view is not just theory on its own, it's theory augmented by practice. You begin to develop your understanding a lot more, because you begin to see that the benefits the Buddha is talking about are real.

Then, if he saw that you were ready for virtue, to accept the fact that it was a good thing, the Buddha would also go on to talk about heaven, the rewards of generosity and virtue in the sensual heavens. It's really interesting: The Canon has very few descriptions of heaven. There's a passage where the Buddha talks about the joys of being a king and he says that those joys are nothing compared to the joys of the sensual heavens. But he doesn't go into a lot of detail—perhaps because he knew that if he went into a lot of detail, people would stop right there. Heaven might sound really good. But he wanted to take them further.

After talking about the joys of heaven, he would remind them, though, that because the causes of going to heaven are impermanent, heaven itself is impermanent. You can't go there and stay for eternity. You get there as a result of actions that are temporary, so heaven itself is going to be temporary.

Think about that. There are some religions that say you can engage in temporary actions but they can get you into heaven for eternity. You hear that and you realize there must be something else going on, it's not just your actions. There's no way that a few temporary actions could have an eternal result. That teaching actually downgrades the attention that we pay to our actions, and it focuses attention on getting in good with whoever's making the real decisions. But if you realize that your actions are what determines everything, you're going to pay a lot of attention to your actions: what you're doing, saying and thinking. Try to be really careful about it. But that means that even the best heavens are impermanent.

This is where the Buddha would go on to talk about the drawbacks of sensuality. In fact, the passage actually says not only the "drawbacks" but also the "degradation". In other words, our fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures really pulls the mind down. It not only pulls you down from heaven but also from what the mind is capable of right here and now.

After all, right concentration, by definition, starts when you're secluded from sensuality. In other words, you put aside your thoughts about sensual pleasures, your plans for what you'd like to eat or touch or taste or see, and you can just be with the sense of the body, felt from within, in the present moment. To do that, you have to see that there are drawbacks to sensuality, or at the very least that

there must be something better.

Because that's what the talk moves on to, after you've seen the drawbacks of sensuality, that the heavens are inconstant, and from them you can fall to the lower realms, which are pretty bad. In contrast to the Buddha's lack of descriptions of heaven there are some pretty graphic descriptions of hell. Sometimes he wouldn't have to bother with hell, he'd just say, "Look at the common animals, see how they suffer." Once you see that the drive to keep coming back to these levels is based on sensuality, he says that's when you begin to see that renunciation is a place of safety—a state of mind that would pull you out of that, a state of mind where you can be at your ease right now and not have to be hungering after your sensual plans.

Once you're on board with that, that's when the Buddha would teach the four noble truths. And even though the four noble truths are a matter of right view, all the path is in there.

So when we're practicing concentration, think a bit about what's leading us here. One of the emotions induced by the graduated path is samvega. The Buddha talks about how good things can get based on ordinary good actions—generosity, virtue—but then those good things end. And we keep going around and around and around, looking for them again, but the universe has no plan. As that other chant says, "There's no one in charge." There's no first mover with some plan for what this is all about. This is both scary but also liberating. It means you don't have to find out what the plan is and get with the plan. You can have your own plan. You can see that the ending of suffering is something really worthwhile and that you can dedicate yourself to it.

We do that by training the mind, developing mindfulness, alertness, ardency as we try to stay with the breath, stay with the events in the mind in the present moment. Mindfulness is not just watching things coming and going. It's remembering what's skillful and what's not skillful, so that when you recognize what's coming up through your alertness, you've got a framework for deciding what should be done. Ardency is what then tries to do it.

So, right now we see that the mind wandering around is in a place of danger and the mind that settles down is a place of safety.

Think of the image of the quail. The quail wanders away from the fields where it's safe and it gets caught by a hawk. And it complains as it's being carried off, "Oh, if I hadn't wandered away, this hawk would have been no match for me." Well, the hawk hears that and probably thinks, "This little snippet of a quail! What does it think it is?" So it lets the quail go, saying, "Okay, go there to your safe place but you won't escape me." So the quail goes to a field where clods of

earth and stones had been turned up by a plow. He stands on one of the stones and says, "Okay, come and get me, you hawk!" So the hawk swoops down and, just as the quail knows that the hawk is getting near it, it jumps behind the stone. The hawk shatters its breast on the stone.

And the Buddha says, "The field stands for the four establishing of mindfulness. The area away from the field stands for your fascination with sensuality." It's not that sensual objects are bad, but the mind as it's going around planning for sensual things is exposing itself to a lot of danger. Whereas if it comes in and stays with its object, if it develops right mindfulness leading into right concentration, it's in a place of safety.

So sometimes when you have trouble getting the mind to settle down, give yourself your own graduated discourse, about all the things that you find alluring out in the world and then realizing that they have their drawbacks and their degradation. If the mind were to get fascinated and infatuated with them, they would pull you down. Whereas when you get the mind into concentration, it pulls you up—out of a place of danger and into a place of safety.

That can be one way of motivating yourself so that things will settle down.