

The Buddha's Revolution

November 21, 2020

After Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha's stepmother, gained ordination, she went to see him and asked for a short Dhamma teaching that she could take and practice with. He taught her eight principles for deciding what really is Dhamma, what really is Vinaya: If any activity, any teaching, was in line with these principles, then it was genuine Dhamma, genuine Vinaya. If it was in line with the opposites, it was not.

As I mentioned last night, these eight principles fall into three types: those that are associated with the goal of the practice, those that are associated with qualities that you have to develop in order to get to that goal, and then those associated with qualities that relate to your relationship to other people as you practice. And as I also mentioned last night, the ones associated with the goal have to do with freedom.

The Buddha looked for freedom in an unexpected place—in dispassion, gaining freedom from the concerns that tie the mind down to its passions. Dispassion is like going out into the wilderness after having been bound up in the issues of being around home, being around your neighborhood, all the back-and-forth that goes on between people. You get out into the wilderness and you realize how petty all those issues are, and it's good that you're free from them: That's dispassion.

It's not a depressed state, as some people think. And it's not a gray, unfeeling state. It's a feeling of great openness, freedom, that you've been released from petty concerns, things that limit the mind.

It's an unexpected place to look for freedom, but there it is: true freedom. The same principle applies to the principles that are related to qualities you have to develop in order to get there. The qualities that lead to freedom do so in an unexpected way.

The qualities are three: One is shedding, in other words, getting rid of any excess things, excess mental states, excess attitudes, that weigh you down. The second is contentment: contentment with the material requisites you have in terms of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. And then there's aroused persistence, which is basically right effort: learning to give rise to skillful qualities and abandon unskillful qualities, and putting an effort in to do that well. These are the areas where the Buddha says you look for freedom.

In terms of shedding and contentment, think of that story of the former king, Bhaddiya, who was one of the Buddha's relatives and became a monk. He goes out to sit under a tree and exclaims, "What bliss! What bliss!"

The other monks are concerned about him, thinking that maybe he's thinking about his old days as king, missing the bliss of kingship. So they go report the matter to the Buddha.

The Buddha probably knows what's going on, but he thinks it's a good opportunity to teach the other monks. So he calls Bhaddiya in, and asks him, "Is this true? Do you sit under a tree and exclaim, 'What bliss! What bliss!'"? And Bhaddiya says, "Yes."

"What do you have in mind when you say that?"

Bhaddiya replies, "I think about back when I was king, and even though I had guards inside my room, outside my room, inside the palace, outside the palace, inside the city, outside the city, inside the country, outside the country, I still had trouble sleeping for fear that someone would try to come and kill me. But now I sit under a tree. My needs are met by what other people give me. My mind is free like a wild deer. This is the bliss I have in mind."

So there is a bliss in not being powerful and not having lots of things. You're not the target of other people's envy, and your mind can be free like a deer. A deer can go anywhere. There are no rules about having to go here, having to go there, at this time, or that time.

So think about that when you feel, "I'm missing this; I'm missing that. I'd like to get this; I'd like to get that." All those piles of things we see being placed out there on the table—you have to ask yourself, "How much of that is actually necessary? How much of it is actually conducive to freedom?"

It's not quite that shedding and contentment are the same thing. They're different in the sense that shedding involves not only shedding material things, but also attitudes. The cases in the Canon have to do with shedding pride.

There was one case of a young man who was very good-looking: so good-looking he figured he didn't have to bow down to anybody, even his parents. It was when he was able to shed his pride and bow down to the Buddha that he was able to get someplace in the practice.

There was also a case of shedding thoughts of revenge: realizing that an injustice had been done, and wanting to punish the people who had acted unjustly. The story goes that there was once a young prince whose parents had been killed by a king, and the prince plots revenge very carefully. But then when the time finally arrives that he can get his revenge, he thinks of what his father told him before he died. "Don't look too far, don't look too close. Animosity isn't

ended through animosity. Animosity is ended through non-animosity.” So he holds himself back—lets go of those thoughts of revenge. As a result, he benefits in many ways.

So when you know that you’ve been wronged and you want to get back, it’s good to stop and think, “What would be gained by that?” Think about how many times the patterns of being wronged and doing wrong have gone back and forth, back and forth. And ask yourself, “Isn’t it time to stop?” When you stop, there’s a great freedom.

I heard a story once about a mother whose son was killed. This was over in a Muslim country where the law was that the parents of someone who’d been killed had the right to decide, if the culprit was caught, whether to forgive him or not. At first, the parents were not going to go for forgiveness; they wanted to see the execution through. But then the mother kept having dreams of her son saying, “Mom, Mom, please don’t go for revenge—let the guy go.”

As she later told reporters, she did not want to have those dreams, but they kept coming again and again. So finally on the day of the execution, there’s the culprit sitting in a chair with the noose around his neck. She goes up, slaps him across the face, pulls off the noose, and lets him go. Afterward, she said she felt a great sense of freedom from that.

So there’s a freedom that comes of not wanting to get back at people, even though you feel you have the right to do it. It’s through non-animosity that animosities are ended.

Those are cases of shedding at an internal level.

With contentment, though, the Buddha’s talks about contentment solely with regard to external things. On the internal level, he says you have to be discontent with the level of your skill. That, he said, was the secret to his awakening: that as long as he hadn’t gone all the way, he wouldn’t let himself rest content.

Of course, you have to rest in concentration, but you rest and then you do work, and then you rest and then do more work. But he wouldn’t let himself be satisfied saying, “This should be good enough. I’ll just content myself here.” And we read about how, even after his awakening, he checked his awakening from many, many angles to make sure it was the real thing. That’s the kind of teacher we have. That’s the way we should approach the practice.

This relates directly to the factor of aroused persistence. It’s an unusual place to look for freedom. But the principle of right effort is that you look for causes and their effects: What kind of actions lead to what kind of effects? Then you judge the actions as to whether you want to do them based on the effects.

Most of us, when we can, just do what we want and don't do what we don't want, without much thought for the long-term consequences. It's only when we're forced to do things we don't want that we do them; we do them against our will. Or we're forced to have to abstain from things we would like to do. But here, the Buddha's saying *voluntarily* you learn how to enjoy doing the things that you don't like to do, but you know will give good results. And you learn how to enjoy stopping yourself from doing things that you like to do that will give bad results.

That's a sign of wisdom. And that's where freedom lies—you're freed from your likes and dislikes, because they're so arbitrary.

Think about the foods you like now, and the foods you used to like ten, twenty, thirty years ago. Your taste in music, your taste in all kinds of things, keeps changing. It's all very arbitrary. If you let yourself be ruled by these things, and if the things you like will get you to do actions that'll lead to bad results down the line, why do them? That's a sign of slavery.

In the same way, if there's something you know that will give rise to good results, but you let the fact that you don't like doing that get in the way—that's slavery. You free yourself when you act in line with discernment.

That's why the Buddha put a principle of causality at the center of his shortest description of awakening: "When this is, that is. When this isn't, that isn't. From the arising of this, comes the arising of that. From the cessation of this, comes the cessation of that."

It's a more complex principle than it looks like on the surface. But at the very least, what you need to know is: You don't go by your likes and dislikes. You go by the results of the actions. Because when the Buddha applies that principle, he's not concerned about causality in general: the causality of billiard balls or the causality of planets. He's concerned with the causality of actions, and how they can either lead to long-term happiness or long-term pain.

You're freeing yourself from the long-term pain that comes from just going by your likes and dislikes. You're opening yourself to the dimension of acts that lead to genuine happiness.

So any teaching that encourages shedding, contentment with material things, and encourages you to arouse your persistence to do what's skillful and to avoid what's unskillful: All that counts as Dhamma and Vinaya. It's not the case that just because the Buddha didn't say something that it's not Dhamma. As he said, anything that's in line with the Dhamma counts as Dhamma. And these are the principles for deciding.

So as you go through the day, ask yourself, "The things I'm choosing to do: Where do they

fit in this scale?” And, “Am I choosing to go for more freedom or for less?” Because that’s what it comes down to when you say, “Well, I’m just going to humor my defilements for the day, or just for this once. Not for the whole day, just for a little bit.” You’re keeping yourself tied down—in a lot of areas where no one else is tying you down, you’re tying yourself down.

So think about how you can learn how to do the things that you may not like doing, but you can talk yourself into doing them, because you know that they’re going to lead to good results. As for the things you want to do but will lead to bad results, you learn how to like talking yourself out of them. That’s what it means to be in line with the customs of the Noble Ones: to delight in abandoning and to delight in developing—i.e., abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful ones. That requires a real revolution inside.

When we think about the revolutions that have taken place in the world that were done for the sake of freedom, we can see where they’ve led us: often to just the opposite. They can’t compare with the Buddha’s revolution. His freedom is genuine. If you think of it in terms of victory, it’s a victory that doesn’t turn into defeat.

This is another case of practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. The Buddha gives us these principles for recognizing what is Dhamma and what’s not. It’s up to us to choose whether we want freedom or would rather go back to our old slavery. Try to think of it in those terms. It makes it a lot easier to choose the path that leads to freedom.