

Sophisticated Dhamma

July 30, 2005

There's an interesting term in the Pali Canon: *saddhamma-patirupa*, which is usually translated as counterfeit Dhamma or imitation Dhamma. What's interesting about it is that the word *patirupa* means sophisticated. In other words, it's Dhamma that gets too sophisticated for its own good, maybe because it sounds prettier or more profound than the original. The problem is that it then starts replacing the true Dhamma. The Buddha said it's like counterfeit gold. Once there's counterfeit gold in the market, you can't tell you which is real gold, which is counterfeit. When it's difficult to tell the two apart, then, as he said, real goal disappears—in other words, the sense of trust, the sense of conviction, the sense of security you have that you've got the real thing.

Just as when people start spreading lies: If they're insistent in holding to their lies, people began to wonder, "Who's telling the truth?" Then it becomes an issue of this person's version versus that person's version. The conviction that you really are listening to the truth, that you definitely have the facts, gets weaker and weaker. When that conviction gets weaker, then it has its toll on the practice.

There's a sutta where the Buddha is talking to Ven. Mahakassapa, on the whole issue of true Dhamma vs. counterfeit Dhamma or sophisticated Dhamma. He says there are five qualities that help maintain the true Dhamma, five kinds of respect: respect for the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha; respect for the training; and respect for concentration.

Now, respect for the training covers all the main parts of the training: virtue, concentration, and discernment. So it's interesting to think about why the Buddha added respect for concentration. It's included in the training, but why is it singled out as being the most important of the three? It's because we tend not to respect it. Some people tell us to have respect for vipassana, or respect for insight, but no respect for concentration. One reason may be because it's the hardest of the factors of the path. It requires a lot of effort, a lot of persistence, just to stick with one object. Sometimes it seems that focusing the breath is like trying to balance a ball bearing on the tip of a needle. It just keeps falling off, falling off, falling off. So you have to have a lot of respect for the potential of concentration to keep at it.

The other part of the problem is that we tend to overlook concentration. We all have concentration to some extent in our minds. Our ability to follow a Dhamma talk is kind of concentration. To comprehend a whole sentence, to

comprehend a whole paragraph, takes a certain level of concentration. It's called momentary concentration in the commentaries. It's the kind of concentration we all have, so it doesn't seem like much. We tend to overlook it. We're sitting here meditating, thinking that with right concentration, there's got to be rapture, there's got to be pleasure, so where is the rapture and pleasure? Sometimes we feel there has to be a sensation of light, or that you have to have visions. Where is the light? Where are the visions? You decide that you've got isn't good enough, so you throw it away. You trample all over it. But it's actually the concentration you already have that has to be allowed to grow.

The same with a sense of ease and fullness of the body: The potential for these things is already there. It's just that, in breathing, we tend to squeeze it, push it, or trample on it, so it doesn't have a chance to grow.

So take whatever little sense you have of ease, concentration, a sense that things are okay, and preserve it, maintain it. Notice when you tend to squeeze it, then try to breathe in such a way that you don't squeeze it. Give it some space. Just let it be.

Ajaan Fuang often used the word *prakhawng*, which is the word they use when, say, a child is trying to walk and it's still not very steady on its feet. So the parent hovers around the child to *prakhwang* it. You don't hold the child's hand because you want the child to get the chance to walk and develop its own sense of balance. But you hold your hands out on either side in case the child falls. That's *prakhang*. So you try to *prakhawng* the mind with the breath. And whatever sense of ease there is in the body, you try to *prakhawng* that as well. That sense of attention—not pushing things, but protecting them: That's what gives your concentration a chance to grow.

Another problem with respect for concentration, of course, is that once you've got it, then you say, "Okay, what's next? Where are the insights?" Or you drop it for the least little thing, whether it's fear or lust or anger or boredom. As soon as something more interesting comes along, you drop the concentration and run with whatever seems more interesting. Of course, many of the interesting things that come along are actually troublemakers and they're going to lead you to problems. Part of you knows that, but you feel that at least it's more interesting—or more important.

You've really got to work on that attitude. Remind yourself that it really is safer to stay with the concentration. You're less likely to do or say or think things that will get you into trouble. And it's actually more interesting to stay here, because once you can stay with the concentration, you start seeing the movements of the mind for what they actually are, rather than getting swept along in the

momentum. You see how the mind creates issues, stitches things together, like a bird's nest. Whatever the birds can pick up gets woven into the nest: yarn, bits of string, pieces of carpet, whatever it can grab hold on. It's all pretty random. Just because something comes barging into the mind doesn't mean that it's really important. It just happens to bubble up at that particular point, like swamp gas bubbling up out of a swamp.

If you can learn to view your thoughts this way, to see how jerryrigged they are, how deceptive they are, that's one way of pulling yourself out so that you don't get so absorbed, you don't get so fascinated with them. You don't get carried away with the emotions. You learn to appreciate the sense of ease and solidity that comes from the concentration. You may not have a lot bright lights, but the sense of ease does give you a good solid basis, give you a firm place to stay. There's a very nourishing sense of well-being that depends on concentration. You need that in order to stay sane. So learn to protect that. Learn to prakhawng the concentration.

So watch out for the voice that says, "Well, what's next? I've gotten this far, what's next step? Let's be quick about this. After all, I don't have that much time." Laypeople with lots of responsibilities tend to think that. Or monks feel, "I've got to get on to the next step. Can't get stuck here." Actually, the Buddha very rarely talks about issue of being stuck in concentration. When he gave instructions to the monks to meditate, he said, "Go do jhana." He didn't say, "Go do vipassana." It was "Go do jhana." And, he also said that it's through the practice of jhana that you develop both insight and tranquility.

In other words, when you're trying to keep the mind still, that's the best time to see the movements of the mind, because you've got something certain, you've got something fixed, against which to compare those movements. Then it's simply a matter of learning how to bring that state of concentration, that absorption, into every aspect of your life, every situation.

In other words, you're going to have to say No to more and more and more of your old habits. And it's in saying No to them that you start understanding them. It's like learning about a child. If you indulge the child in all of its wishes, you'll never really learn what's going on with the child. Why does the child want that? Say No to it, and it'll start arguing with you, "But I need it for this, that, the other reason." Then you can begin to see it which are the good reasons and which are the stupid ones, which are the ones you want to encourage, which are the ones you don't.

This is a very important principle in learning about the mind and seeing exactly where your defilements are. If you don't say No to the mind, everything

seems to flow, and there's no problem at all. "Who says there's such a thing as defilement?" The part of the mind that even resists having any of its thoughts called defilement: That's what it'll say. But if you learn to say, "No, I'm going to stay right here. I'm not going to run out with whatever—the latest thoughts, the latest idea, the latest urge or emotion. I'll just stay right here," then the mind will start squirming. It'll start complaining. When it starts complaining, that's when you start to see, "Oh, this is what motivated that urge to begin with." And you can begin to see whether the reasons are good or not. But don't be too quick to say, "Okay, that's a good reason." Keep probing, probing, saying No, No, No, until you're really sure, 100% sure, that this really is a skillful intention. It's something worth following through with.

Now, it's a lot easier to say No when you've got a good place to stay, a good solid foundation where there's a sense of ease, a sense of fullness, to minimize the hunger to go running off. This way, you help maintain the true Dhamma, not only in the world at large, but specifically in your own thoughts, words, and deeds, by showing respect for concentration, putting in whatever effort is needed to attain it and then, once you've got it, keeping up the effort to maintain it, to keep it going, and using it in every area of life.

Then it becomes your touchstone, so that you can know which is the genuine gold and which is the counterfeit; which is genuine Dhamma and which is sophisticated Dhamma—basically so that you can tell when the mind is telling itself the truth and when it's telling itself lies. That's what it comes down to. And the more you respect the principle of concentration, the better position you'll be in to see the difference.