

In Line with the Dhamma

August 16, 2021

When he was passing away, the Buddha said that if you wanted to show true homage to him, you would practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. Elsewhere he defined that as practicing for the sake of dispassion and disenchantment. Those qualities sound negative, but really they're not. As the Buddha said, he taught dispassion for the aggregates because having dispassion for them would be for your long term welfare and happiness.

So the purpose of dispassion is happiness. Always keep that in mind. The Buddha is basically saying, "Here it is: There is a way to find true happiness." You think of the different teachings that were available in his time, and there's nothing as positive as his. Some of the teachers of the day said that everything was already determined. Your life was already blocked out for you. There was nothing you could do about it. Others said that everything was total chaos, so there was no way you could follow a path of practice that would lead anywhere in particular. Just grab what you can while you can. Others said Yes, there is a way to find happiness in the afterlife, but you have to be really wealthy in order to do it, because you'll have to sponsor big sacrifices.

The Buddha came and basically said that there is an end of suffering, and anybody can do it. Yet there were still people who clung to their old beliefs and attacked him. They would rather be unhappy in their way than happy in the Buddha's way.

As we practice, we have to ask ourselves if we have that attitude as well. There's a voice in the mind that says, "You won't be able to do this. Don't even try." All too often we listen to that voice. It's a very stubborn voice. It would rather be miserable in its own way than put out the extra effort required to find true happiness. So if you find that voice inside, recognize it as being opposed to the Dhamma. It can dress itself up as a Dhamma voice, but don't believe it.

The forest ajaans have an image. They say the Buddha's like a shopkeeper who's got a marvelous item that he wants to sell, and he's selling it for very cheap. He's telling people all over the world, "You can buy it for really cheap, everybody can afford this." Yet still there are people who say, "No thanks." He's giving us instructions: This is how we can cross across the flood of sensuality, views, becoming, ignorance. This is how you do it. This is how you make that raft. This is how you swim. This is what you do when you get to the other shore. But you say,

“No, I’d rather just hold on to these twigs and branches and leaves on this shore. Either that, or I’d rather flow down the river.”

So what is the Buddha asking you to have dispassion for? The five aggregates, which go into making up your sense of self. This is where people resist. But you can ask yourself, “Has my sense of self so far been able to bring me true happiness?” It’s brought some happiness, some pleasure, otherwise you wouldn’t hold on to it. Sometimes you hear the idea of self as being so illogical that all you have to do is realize how illogical it is and then you’ll give it up. But that’s not the case. If it were totally useless, totally illogical, nobody would hold on. It actually serves its purposes.

But you have to ask yourself, is there something better? And are you open to the idea that there’s something better? Look for the part of the mind that’s closed off. That’s where your stubbornness is, and it’s based on a peculiar kind of pride. The pride says, “The Buddha may have some good news, but I’m too wise for that, I’m too jaded for that, I’m too experienced in the world for that.” But then what do you have left? Aging, illness, and death, over and over and over again.

That chant just now: The world is swept away, it does not endure, offers no shelter, there’s no one in charge. It has nothing of its own; one has to pass on, leaving everything behind. Yet it’s still a slave to craving for these very same things. The things that get swept away. The things that are totally without protection. Things that you can’t really hold on to as you or yours, and yet we keep coming back to them, again and again. The Buddha is basically saying, okay, there is aging, there is illness, there is death, there is separation, but you have the power of your actions. And for the purpose of the path, be passionate about the path.

Try to figure out what he meant when he described right view. Try to figure out what’s involved in right resolve. What would your life be like if you did nothing but right speech, right action, and held to right livelihood? What would your mind be like if you really did engage in right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration? It’s a good path. It would make a good you and create a good world around you. Maybe not the world you see in your devices, but the world right around you is shaped by the way you act. And more importantly, the world in your mind is shaped by your actions. You have this power with you. Yet you say, “Nah, I don’t want to use it.” What is that? What’s the satisfaction there? What’s the allure there?

Sometimes it’s based on a fear of disappointment. You’ve put a lot of practice in, put a lot of effort in, and then you happen to die before the path shows its real results. But you’ve got to remember, death is not the end. There is a momentum,

there is a trajectory. As you develop the qualities of the path, they will lead you on. You're more and more likely to find them the next time around. If you give up on them now, that closes off a lot of opportunities now, and if you're used to closing them off now, it becomes a habit.

So it's a peculiar form of stubbornness. We usually think of people who don't practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma as those who want to change the Dhamma. But they are also those who simply aren't willing to practice the Dhamma as it is. The reasons are many, but try to figure out: What's your reason for not really holding close to the actual practice? When you look at the reason, is it really something you want to hold on to?

Pride has lots of different forms. Remember the Buddha's definition of conceit, where you think that you're better than others, or equal to others, or worse than others. Thinking that you're not up to the path is a form of conceit. So think about that. Recognize that it's not wise humility, it's conceit. Then do what you can to get beyond it.