

Something New

July 17, 2021

A brahman came to see the Buddha one time and asked him about the path of practice. After the Buddha explained the path, the brahman asked him, “Given that there is this path, will the whole world gain awakening, or only a half, or a third?” The Buddha didn’t answer.

Ven. Ananda, who was sitting nearby, got upset, afraid that the brahman would be offended because the Buddha didn’t answer an important question. So he pulled the brahman aside and said to him, “It’s like a fortress with a wise gatekeeper. The gatekeeper goes around the fortress, inspecting the walls, and aside from the one gate into the fortress, he doesn’t see any opening—not even a hole big enough for a cat to slip through. And he reflects: He doesn’t know how many people are going to come in and out of the fortress, but he does know that all the people who will come in and out of the fortress will have to go in and out through the gate. In the same way, the Buddha doesn’t make it his business to know how many people will follow the path. But he does know that all those who are going to go to total freedom will have to follow this path.”

There was another time when the Buddha was asked about his knowledge of the future. There were teachers at the time who believed in determinism: in other words, that the future is already determined by the past. They would talk about events that would happen in the future with 100% certainty. So someone asked the Buddha what he knew about the future. Now, the Buddha had many times talked about tendencies that would play out in the future, but as for his *knowledge* of the future, he said he knew that he was free from rebirth.

That was it—and it has to do with the fact that he didn’t teach determinism. In other words, what’s going to happen in the future is not totally determined by the past. In fact, what’s going to happen right now is not totally determined by the past.

In the way the Buddha taught causality, the present moment is composed of three things: the results of past actions, current actions, (in other words, your current intentions), and the results of current intentions.

Without your current intentions, there wouldn’t be an experience of the present. Your current intentions are that important, and they don’t have to be shaped by the past.

It’s good to keep that point in mind, because all too often we’re told that the Buddha taught that the present moment is shaped by the past, and the present’s

going to shape the future. But if the present moment is already shaped by the past, that means the future is shaped as well, because the present is already determined. Everything is locked in. But as the Buddha said, if everything were locked in, there would be no path of practice. You couldn't change your mind, or if there was a change in your mind, it would have nothing to do with what you were doing, because both the change in your mind and what you're doing externally would be already determined from the past. That, the Buddha taught, was a pernicious doctrine. It was so bad that even though he wasn't the sort of person who would go out and pick fights with other people, he *would* go search out teachers who taught that. He'd tell them, "You're leaving people unprotected. You're basically saying if they're going to kill, steal, cheat, it's already determined. There's nothing they can do not to do that."

But, as the Buddha said many times, the fact is that we can develop skillful qualities. We can change. In fact, that's what the four noble truths are all about. Why are we suffering? We're suffering because of things we're doing, but we don't have to keep on doing the things we're doing. We can change. We can bring something new into the world. In fact, with every moment, we have that possibility. You can bring something new into the world, something unexpected. So why not make it unexpectedly good?

All too often, people don't take advantage of this possibility. They have old habits, and they fall back on old habits. They have old ways of seeing the world, and they just fall back on those. But the Buddha is saying that you can change these things, and he lays out the path to change: the eightfold path. And it's a noble path. It lifts the level of the mind.

So it's all laid out, and it's up to you to decide whether to bring something new into your life, something really good. Because there are no mysteries about the path. Everything is laid out very clearly.

The one mystery is in this freedom we have. Why do we have this freedom? The Buddha never explains, but he doesn't have to explain. He just tells us to take advantage of the fact that we have this ability. He said that he wouldn't have taught if people couldn't change their habits, if they couldn't develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful qualities. It's because they can: That's why he taught. That's why we have the Dhamma.

So even though the Buddha wouldn't know whether or not we were going to follow the path, we can decide that. We can be the deciding factor. We can decide that we're going to change.

So look into your mind. Wherever there's suffering in your life, it's coming from inside. Now, many people will complain, saying, "But that's letting

everybody else off the hook.” Well, they’ve got their suffering. And if your happiness had to depend on changing other people, getting them to be just the way you wanted them to, you’re in the wrong world. You have to change yourself. That’s what the four noble truths are basically saying. And they’re also saying, “This is how you do it.”

First look and understand where your suffering is. It’s in the clinging: the things you’re holding on to. The Buddha puts it in fairly abstract terms: There are forms, feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness. Out of those five, fabrications covers the widest variety of mental events. It’s the way you talk to yourself. It’s the way you think. It’s your emotions, your world views, your ideas of what you have to do, what you don’t have to do, how other people should be, how other people should not be.

An awful lot of things fall under fabrication. So you want to look into it. How are you fabricating the present moment?—because the intentional element in the fabrication is your potential for freedom. If you just keep on fabricating the same old garbage over and over and over again, you’re not taking advantage of the fact that the Buddha has been born into the world. He went to all that effort to find the teaching, went through all that effort to teach it after he found it. And there have been people from generation to generation for more than 2,600 years now who have found that his teaching is really valuable, and they’ve passed it on. It’s something that’s been carefully handed from hand to hand to hand. You don’t want it to be the case that it comes to you and you drop it.

As long as you’re holding the teaching, get the best out of it. Get the most out of it, realizing that with each breath you have the opportunity to bring something new into the world: a skillful thought, a skillful intention. Once there is a skillful intention, then you can continue it. That could be new, too, even though it’s the same skillful intention—as when you’re doing concentration practice. The fact that you’re continuing it is something good that you can keep bringing into the world, and then you learn how to reflect on yourself so that you can make your concentration deeper.

You’ll learn how to reflect on all your actions, because this is what Dhamma practice is about. How are you going to learn something new unless you reflect? You look at what you do, what you get as a result. Then you ask yourself, “Are the results really satisfactory?” As long as there’s suffering in the mind, no. There’s something wrong with what you’re doing.

There will be part of the mind that says, “I can’t change. This is just the way I am.” That part: That’s defilement speaking. You have to learn how to recognize it, because all too often, we identify with it. We set ourselves up in opposition to the

Dhamma. And even though the Buddha's very kindly trying to say, "Here it is, here it is: This is the way out," we cross our arms and say, "No." That's the new thing we're bringing into the world. But the world already has an awful lot of that kind of thing.

If you look at yourself and see, "Okay, this is what I'm doing that's causing trouble," then ask yourself, "What would be another way of doing that?" The Buddha keeps pointing, "Here, here, here. Try this, try this." So whatever it is, whatever the wall is in the mind that puts up resistance, you've got to learn how to tear that wall down. That will open the opportunity for something genuinely new and genuinely good to come into the world in the present moment. And you always have the opportunity to do more of the same, the same—in other words, something new, something good, something new, something good, again and again and again.

The opportunities keep coming. Just make sure that you don't throw them away, because it's not the case that you'll always have the chance to know the Dhamma. You know it in this lifetime, but if you throw it away in this lifetime, you probably won't encounter it in the next. And there will come a point, as the Buddha said—even though he didn't know exactly when—when his teachings would be forgotten. This has happened with all the Buddhas of the past. And then the world goes through long fallow periods where those who find awakening have to do all the work themselves.

But here we've got the teachings to help us. They point us into the mind, saying, "Right here, right here. This is the problem." So you have to look at why you resist—and why you want to identify with that resistance. Ask yourself, "What do you gain?" It's all loss. What little gain there is, is not really worth it. This is why the Buddha has you reflect and reflect, comparing: What are the advantages? What is the allure of the way you're doing things? What are the drawbacks? When you realize the drawbacks are genuine, they're not necessary, and you don't have to keep acting in unskillful ways, that's when you've got a chance. Make the most of that opening. The more you take advantage of that opening, the wider it grows—and the more it becomes habitual to bring something good into the world with every moment, instead of the same old garbage you've been bringing into the world for who knows how long. We do have this chance to make a difference, to make a good difference. So make the most of it while you can.