

Shoyo Sensei's Dharma Message:

Buddha-Dharma: Introduction – 5

Question (1):

In the last session, you said that the Buddha only describes how things operate plainly and clearly. In explaining this, you compared the Buddha to the Surgeon General who tells the American public how a certain physical illness is caused and how it can be prevented. But doesn't it sound like the role of the Buddha only very minor?

Answer (1):

No. The Buddha once said, "When our body is sick, our mind can still be healthy." Buddha-Dharma is information of the highest quality that teaches us to live our life positively and happily despite having incurable illnesses. Those who continuously listen to Buddha-Dharma at the temple can still be very happy and positive despite having illnesses. In this society, many of us are so eager to obtain information about physical illnesses, e.g., cancer. We are all desperately concerned with physical exercise or diet. Unfortunately, when it comes to the body issue, we become very serious. But, when it comes to the mind issue, we do not care.

As long as we wish to live happily, we need to keep going to the temple to listen to Buddha-Dharma as much as possible until we die. If not every Sunday, then at least once a month. Buddha-Dharma is much more essential in our life than the Surgeon General's information .

Question (2):

If the Buddha only explains the Causal Conditional relationship and does not tell us what we should do or should not do, it sounds like there is no ethics in Buddhism.

Answer (2):

On the contrary, the entire teaching of the Buddha is ethical. Here, it is very important to understand that Buddhism has a systematic structure of ethics that is fundamentally different from the ethics that we usually know. In Western ethics, which we all are familiar with, value judgment of good and bad is the essential. But, Buddhist ethics does not use such notion as good, bad, right or wrong. Without using these terms and concepts, Buddha-Dharma teaches most highly qualified teachings related to so called "ethics."

You will more clearly understand when I explain Buddhist ethics in relation to our current medicine. The Surgeon General collects all the necessary data in medical fields and addresses statements to the American public in a very simple way, such as "Smoking causes lung cancer." In this case, if one smokes, an action of smoking is, correctly speaking, "dangerous" and "harmful" to one's health, rather than "bad" in the moral sense. If one chooses to smoke knowing the Surgeon General's warning, one's decision-making of smoking can be regarded as "unwise" or "foolish," but not "wrong" in ethical sense.

Ethics in Buddhism is similar to this. The choice of being selfish is "unskillful" and "unwise." Among numberless actions, selfcenteredness is the most dangerous and harmful action to oneself and others. As you see, in the system of ethics in Buddhism the issue is not whether an action is good or bad, but whether this action is helpful to the goal of the perfect health of mind, the supreme happiness, i.e., Enlightenment.

Question (3):

Then, how does one utilize the knowledge of Causal Conditionality into their day-to-day experiences without being told what is bad or wrong?

Answer (3):

Listening to Buddha-Dharma is crucial. When the Buddha states that, "Harming cannot be done without hatred/anger/greed/confusion," one will closely examine oneself and see if it is true. Then, finding that it

is true and real, this information becomes one's own, and one will use it in life as a wise guideline. As an example, let's read the following passage from one of the old Buddhist texts:

“At Savatthi. Now on that occasion King Pasenadi of Kosala had gone together with Queen Mallika to the upper terrace of the palace. Then King Pasenadi said to Queen Mallika: “Is there, Mallika, anyone more dear to you than yourself?”

“There is no one, great king, more dear to me than myself. But is there anyone, great king, more dear to you than yourself?”

“For me too, Mallika, there is no one more dear than myself.”

Then King Pasenadi of Kosala descended from the palace and approached the Blessed One. Having approached, he paid homage to the Blessed One, sat down to one side, and related to the Blessed One his conversation with Queen Mallika. Then the Blessed One, having understood the meaning of this, on that occasion recited this verse:

Having traversed all quarters with the mind,
One finds none anywhere dearer than oneself.
Likewise, each person holds himself or herself most dear;
Hence one who loves himself or herself does not harm others.”

(From *Samyutta Nikaya*)

Mallika had been a poor flower girl whom King Pasenadi met by chance after a military defeat. He fell in love with her, married her, and appointed her his chief queen. The king had asked her the above question expecting her to say, “You are dearer to me than myself,” and then to ask him the same question, to which he would have given the same reply, so that they would have strengthened their mutual love. But, Mallika, being wise and learned, answered with complete honesty and the king too had to reply in the same way. To King Pasenadi, the Buddha extracts an ethical maxim: since one loves oneself above all others, one should realize the same is true of others and treat them with kindness and respect.

The above “Buddhist Golden Rule” explains the danger of being harmful to oneself and others. When one, who wishes to be safe, unharmed and peaceful, obtains such knowledge, one chooses to abstain from harming oneself and others, just like the one who wants to be free from lung cancer and live happily will abstain from smoking.

One's close and careful observation of reality is another important key, like Mallika did. In either way, Buddhism is a religion of “wisdom” and “awareness.”

Question (4):

So are you saying that Buddha-Dharma is not something to believe blindly?

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Answer (4):

Definitely so. Each one of us is always invited to empirically check, examine, inspect, and test Buddha-Dharma to see if it is true and real. This is the nature of Buddha-Dharma.

Question (5):

Tell me more about the characteristics of Buddha-Dharma.

Answer (5):

Dharma has six characteristics. They are

- 1) Well-taught or well spoken by the Buddha
- 2) Can be seen in this life itself
- 3) Timeless
- 4) Inviting investigation (or falsifiable)
- 5) Leading onward
- 6) To be verified by the wise by and for himself/herself

It is crucial to keep in mind that each Jodo Shinshu follower is constantly invited to empirically investigate Dharma, be led forward by Dharma, and to witness Dharma by each of us personally.

Samyutta Nikaya Commentary defines Dharma as “irresistible” and says as follows:

“Whereas ordinary food, even though very delicious, fails to give pleasure when one eats it again and again and becomes something to be rejected and removed, this Dharma is different. The wise can listen to this Dharma for a hundred or a thousand years without becoming satisfied.”

“Dharma is unadulterated, nourishing and unlike material food, which becomes tasty to be addition of condiments, this Dharma is sweet and nutritious by its own nature.”

How fortunate we are to be exposed to such delicious and nutritious Dharma!