Dharmette: Qurrels (2 of 5) Roots of Quarrels

Gil Fronsdal

October 31, 2023

So, hello and welcome to the second talk on the Buddhist teachings related to quarrels, quarrels, disputes. And the idea that human beings live in conflict with each other was very well recognized by the Buddha.

And not only do you have a lot to say about it, but it could be understood that the core teachings of the Buddha, even the whole purpose of becoming enlightened, has to do with creating a world where people are not driven by unethical behavior. That the core teachings of the Buddha are ethical, with an ethical goal. A person who is awakened is defined as someone who will not harm anybody at all, including in the way in which we have disagreements with people. Certainly we’ll have disagreements, but to disagree in an argumentative way with hostility and anger and assertions of power and demeaning other people is not the direction in which the Dharma teaching, Dharma practice, the Buddha taught. He really wants us to take responsibility for our contribution to suffering in the world. And certainly that’s not enough to diminish the suffering in the world just to look at ourselves. But without that, without a deep look at ourselves and what’s going on with us, we could actually inadvertently continue being models and perpetuators of hostility, of hate, of assertion of power, of all kinds of ways that continue the endless cycles of harm that has existed since the time of the Buddha.

So his teachings on quarrels is the topic for this week. And one of the ways, so the primary strength of the Dharma that Buddha taught is the capacity of this practice for us to really take a deep dive in ourselves and understand ourselves. Not to ignore the world, but I like to think of it as we deep dive inside of ourselves to really see ourselves and free ourselves from the inside out. Turn ourselves inside out and return to the world with a heightened sensitivity and capacity to care, to love, without any hostility, without taking on any stress in that process, without any kind of conceit that gets in the way of caring for others and the world.

So in one set of teachings about quarrels, disputes, the Buddha talks about six roots of quarreling. And these are the six kind of problematic ways in which, underneath the quarrel, that from which we contribute to the quarrel, to the argument, to the disagreement, in an unhealthy, unbenefficial way.

And so we want to find a way to go under the surface, go a layer down, and not kind of constantly be involved at the level of the quarrel and who said what and what’s going on and what I should do. Which is living a little bit in an objectified world of the problem. But we also want to take time out to really understand what are we contributing? What gasoline are we putting into the fire? And so one of the purposes of things like meditation is the introspection to drop a layer, at least a layer into our being, into our psychology, to see what is the, what are we contributing in terms of pressure, in terms
of energetics, agitation, stress, onto how we contribute to the quarrel.

So the Buddha talked about six roots. And in fact, each, when he talks about them, he pairs up, there's a pair. So somehow they're considered maybe synonyms or close synonyms or part of a family, these six pairs. And each of them we can understand to imply that as they settle, maybe they get replaced by their opposite.

The first root, and Buddha uses the word root, because the reference point is a plant, that if you cut off the plant at the surface, it sprouts again from the roots. And if you really want to get rid of a weed, you have to really get down there and pull out the roots so it doesn't, nothing can re-sprout. So the first of these roots is anger and resentment. And anger is in the Buddhist lexicon, is maybe not the same as the English word, the coda is the word in Pali, involves, some people in the West want to justify certain kinds of anger, clean, white anger, or something, justified anger. But the anger that Buddhism says is a problem, is a poison, is anger that has within it hostility, has within it hatred. And resentment is also kind of a poison that certainly harms the person who's resenting. And so these are two roots.

The first root is anger and resentment. And if these settle down, then what's possible is friendliness, care. We can come from a different place. We might still disagree, but to disagree in friendly ways. And if we can't be friendly, because that's too high a bar, to disagree with care for the welfare of everyone involved. What does it take to really engage in disagreement in a productive way? Not easy.

The second root is contempt and spite. To have this attitude towards others who are in disagreement with and have contempt and spite. And we know that there's a whole movement and political movements, politicians, who are demonizing the opponent. And it's kind of contempt and spite. That is just putting gasoline on the fire of a lot of social, political, national conflicts that exist in our time. And there's no hope to resolve a conflict if there's contempt, spite, hatred, demonization of the other. And so there the alternative is respect. To enter into disagreements with respect for the other, even if they don't respect us.

The third root is envy and greed. And the word for greed can also mean selfishness. So envy and selfishness. And envy for some people is a really deep poison. It's not an issue for me, but I've talked to people, and I'm so surprised when I started talking to people, learning from people from which, how toxic it is for some people to live with envy. And it seems to maybe come along with a certain kind of undermining of one's own integrity or well-being. To just kind of be envious of others and what they have in their situation. Or to be greedy, selfish, to want more, want everything. And so some of the disputes has to do with, we want what they have, and they don't want to give it to us. We can't have it. The alternative, if that settles, if that level of tension within quiets down, the alternative is, the healthy alternative is generosity. To want other people to be well, to have things, give them some of our things. Wish them well.

Then the next root for disputes, quarrels, is deceit and deceptiveness. So to be trying to deceive people into getting what we want. To be deceptive in what we say, to lie. And this also is poison for our society,
poison for our interpersonal relationships. And it means that there’s no trust, it means that again, there’s no respect for others. We’re just trying to get our way at any cost at all. The alternative to that, as we relax the inner tensions, forces of deceit and deception, is honesty. Honesty is medicine. Honesty is the food for health, psychological, spiritual health, that spreads and inspires.

The next one, the root of quarrels, is evil and wrong view. And what exactly is meant by evil is not so clear. But a wickedness, just a pure and simple, maybe, tendency some people have just wanting to cause harm without any other reason, but to cause harm in some way. And wrong view is the wrong view that doesn’t understand the nature of what is harmful and what is not harmful. So both of these, evil and wrong view, from the Buddhist point of view, involve some kind of tension, some kind of contraction, some kind of agitation within, just like all the other roots. So as we drop down in our awareness of self, below the level of the quarrel, and really in the subjective level, we start discovering these tensions, and we discover what we can relax. And if this one relax, evil and wrong view, there can be greater wisdom. And the core wisdom in Buddhism is the wisdom that, penetrating wisdom that applies to almost everything, is what causes harm and what causes welfare, real welfare.

And the last root is attachment to the world. Just being attached to this life that we’re living. And it can seem like, of course, we should be that way. But the alternative is to be generous to the world. And we don’t have to be attached to the world to live a full, full life. In fact, I would suggest that we’re not being attached to anything. But being able to give, being able to be a generative from what’s inside out, is really what is a kind of fantastic sense of well-being and freedom. To be attached to the world means that we are a consumer only, holding on and not giving away.

So the primary lesson that I’d like to pass on for the Buddhist lesson is that we want to be able to sit quietly enough in some way or other, or find a way to be, that we can step below, look below the level upon which the quarrels are going on, the disputes, the fights that we have, to see what is our contribution within. What’s the tension, pressure? What are the roots within us? And this list is a good checklist to see. Are any of these present? And as we find them, to really feel the physical, subjective way in which the tension, pressure is present for us, the agitation. And then learn to relax. And maybe it’s easier to relax physically, mentally, emotionally even, than it is to pull out the root itself initially, to stop being envious. But we might have access to relaxing the tension around it.

So I would propose to you today, if you have any of these things today, anger, envy, greed, deceit, tendencies to lie, attachments of any kind, contempt for other people that you read about in the news, politicians, whatever it might be. Stop. Look below it subjectively. Is there any tension? And if there is, see if you can relax. And see what healthy alternative is possible when you relax. So thank you very much and look forward to seeing being with you again tomorrow.