

The Humble Way to Awakening

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When you compare the Buddha's teachings to the other teachings being taught in his time, one thing immediately stands out: how humble the main topic of his teachings were. Other teachers were talking about the universe as a whole, whether it was eternal, not eternal, finite, infinite. Or about the nature of the human personality: Is the body the same as your life force, or is the body something separate? How would you describe an awakened person? What are the basic building blocks of the universe? Those kinds of issues. Big issues, Abstract issues.

The Buddha, on the other hand, taught something very immediate, concrete, and quite humble: the problem of suffering, the problem of pain. Something that we don't like to look at, something that we tend to run away from. Something that we wish would just get out of the way so we could deal with the larger issues of life. But the Buddha had the insight to see that dealing with this very immediate, very humble issue really does open you up to the larger issues of life. Even though the main topic of his teachings was suffering, it wasn't limited just to that. What he saw was that if you focused on this one issue, all the other issues get cleared up. Either you find that they get answered or you realize that they weren't worth answering to begin with.

It's important that we realize this as we practice. Some people say that our suffering is such a small selfish issue to be dealing with. Why can't we be dealing with larger issues like compassion, the world as a whole, the interconnectedness of everybody? Why? Because those issues tend to be vague and abstract. They really don't get to the main issue in life: why it is that the mind creates suffering for itself. That's the big issue. If, through our compassion, we could save other beings, then that would be a useful topic to focus on. But the problem is that each of us suffers because of our own lack of skill in dealing with pain. If we'd be willing to learn from the pain, then each of us could take care of our problems and there wouldn't be issues in life at all.

So as you meditate, keep reminding yourself that you're preparing yourself to deal intelligently and insightfully with issues of pain, suffering, disease in body and mind. Particularly in the mind. Pain in the body, as it turns out, is not the issue. We make it an issue that spreads into the mind. If pain simply arose in the body without our connecting it to any suffering or disease in the mind, it wouldn't be an issue.

The problem is that the mind has laid claim to the body. After all, it needs the body to help manipulate the world to get what it wants out of it. So it has a sense of ownership, or at least it tries to assert ownership. But then it turns out that the thing it wants to own, the thing it wants to manipulate, has problems. And so it's stuck. It can't really let go but can't really control it. As the Buddha pointed out, your sense of self comes from this sense of control. We can, to at least some extent, control the body. That's why we assume that it's us or ours. But then you run into the fact that your control isn't complete. This is the source of a lot of the conversations and arguments and complaints in the mind. Why is this?

As the Buddha once said, your normal reaction to pain is twofold: one,

bewilderment as to why is this happening; and then, two, the search to find somebody who knows a way out of this pain. Because those two tendencies occur together—the bewilderment plus the search—the search tends to go off in the wrong directions, like the story they tell of the man who jumped on his horse and rode it off in all directions. The mind thrashes around, grasping at this, grasping at that. So the Dhamma that explains the cause of suffering and the path to its end is the Buddha's contribution to end our bewilderment so that our search actually leads to the end of suffering. In the course of following his path, you'll also find that other issues get settled as well.

Suffering is like the watering hole in the savannah. If you're going out to shoot a documentary on the animals in the savannah, you don't range over the savannah looking for them, them because for the most part you wouldn't find them. They'd see you coming and they'd hide. But if you station your camera next to the watering hole, everybody's going to have to come to the watering hole at some point during the day. That's when you get to see them. And it's the same with pain and suffering: All the issues in the mind will gather around here, so this is where you get to see them. If you're in the right position—which is what we're trying to create here as we meditate, putting the mind in a position where it has enough sense of security and solidity through its practice of mindfulness and concentration—you can resist your normal reaction to pain or at least drop the normal reaction to pain and react to it in a new way. As the Buddha said, the way beyond suffering is to comprehend it. Comprehending means that you understand it so thoroughly that you can let it go. You develop a sense of dispassion for it. So to comprehend it you have to watch it again and again and again. The more you watch it, the more you learn.

This ability to learn is an important part of the meditation. When you meditate, you're not simply putting the mind through the meat grinder: i.e. imposing a particular technique on it that's supposed to do all the work for you. The technique puts the mind in a position where it can observe itself, where it can observe its tendencies and learn from what it watches. This involves feedback loops. In other words, you deal with the pain in a certain way and then you watch and see what happens. Then you do it again and see what happens again. If you've watched enough to realize that this particular approach doesn't work, then you stop to consider what other approach might work. This is how you learn about things. You don't just sit there and look at them. You poke them.

It's like coming across a little animal in the forest and it's all curled up. So you poke it a little bit to see whether it's alive. If you really want to learn about it, you take it into the laboratory. When I was taking biology in college, our first experiment was to take some little rabbits and put them in a glass box, and then change the temperature in the box to see how the rabbits' respiration responded. Afterwards I really felt sorry for the rabbits—they hadn't volunteered for the experiment—but at least we didn't torment them, and we did learn something. When we lowered the temperature, they breathed more slowly. When we raised the temperature, they breathed more quickly. In other words you change the conditions and see how things respond.

It's this ability, one, to act and two, to observe: That's how we learn about things. If you simply acted without observing, you'd be like a machine. If you simply observed without acting, you wouldn't know anything for sure. Things

would come and things would go and you wouldn't know what the connections where.

So you learn how to sit here and watch and do things with the pain. And sometimes the doing means simply treating it with equanimity, trying not to identify with it. Simply watching it as an event that comes and goes. That is a kind of action. You decide to take that approach and then watch what happens as a result. You may notice that there are changes in the pain. Sometimes it flares up and sometimes it dies down. Sometimes the mind is perfectly fine; other times the mind is aggravated, irritated by the pain. Well, what happened? When the aggravation comes, what comes along with the aggravation? When the aggravation goes, what goes along with that? Pose the question. Even the posing of a question is a kind of action. It's a part of your experiment with the pain.

This is why the Buddha has us divide things into the aggregates, because the comings and goings of perceptions, the comings and goings of thought fabrications are going to have an impact on the pain. You see that the perception, the label you place on the pain, acts like a bridge. Certain perceptions come and they make the anguish flare up. When you can catch that happening, you realize that the perception doesn't have to be there. Anything that arises can pass away.

So in this way you poke the pain. You change the environment around the pain to learn about how it acts. This is the way you learn about it, through the combination of the doing and the watching. That's the feedback loop. The watching helps you change the doing, and the changes in the doing helps you understand what's connected with what.

You come to see how a lot of the narratives of your life, a lot of your world views, come flaring up. I once had a very sad conversation with a man who'd been a martial arts expert and had been able to do amazing things with his body. Yet as he got older he developed really bad arthritis and he was convinced that God was doing this to him. Of course the idea that God, the creator of the universe, was dumping on him, was a horrible story, a horrible world view to carry around. Yet he wouldn't let it go. So of course he was going to suffer.

If you have that kind of world view, it makes it difficult to look at the pain with curiosity, with the simple desire to comprehend it, because you're also carrying around the idea that the basic principal underlying the universe is dumping on you in an unfair way. But if you simply have the attitude that whatever comes up and causes pain and suffering, you're going to let that go, you quickly see which narratives and world views aggravate the pain and which ones are helpful. That's how this humble topic of pain can start addressing a lot of the bigger issues that you carry around.

So as you deal with both physical and mental pain in your practice, realize that it's not something you just want to push out of the way or get past so you can get on to the real work. Dealing with the mental pain is the real work. And all the other issues in your life are going to come gathering around here as well. You'll be able to see them in action. They're all part of the complex you want to comprehend to the point where you can gain dispassion and let go. Whatever is causing the suffering, you let go of it. At the same time, you develop the qualities that allow you to stay there and watch and probe and learn.

This way you don't get overwhelmed with the desire to push the pain away and get rid of it. You've got yourself in a position where you can watch for long

periods of time and not load yourself down with the pain. The other day we were talking about dealing with aggravations that last for hours and hours. Well, one of the tricks for dealing with aggravations that last for hours and hours is not to think about the hours and hours. The pain has been here for two hours; don't think about the past two hours of pain. Think about what there is right now, right now, right now. When you wonder how much longer it's going to last....don't ask. "How much longer will I have to sit here?" Don't ask. Simply asking that creates that story, that world in your mind that's going to weigh things down. If you deal just with the pain in the present moment, it doesn't weigh the present moment down to point where it's going to break.

So if you allow yourself to be humble enough to deal with just what's going on in the present moment, to watch when the pain comes and when it goes and what comes and goes along with it, you find that your willingness to be humble will open things up to something really grand.