The Buddha’s Letter

September 6, 2018

I’ve told you about that character in the book Sirens of Titan, who thinks too much. He’s been kidnapped to join an army on Mars. He starts thinking about what’s going on with this organization, and he becomes a troublemaker. So they have to erase his memory. Now they can’t erase all of his memory, otherwise he would be totally non-functional. So they erase the major part. But this happens to him several times in the book, and he’s figured out which part of his memory is going to be saved. And so in that part of his memory he reminds himself, “I’ve written a letter, and it’s in this little hole in this rock formation. Go there, find the letter.” And in the letter he gives a message to himself about the things he wants to make sure he doesn’t forget. They’re trying to make him forget. So the question is, suppose the Buddha were to write that letter. If he was sending it to you, what would he put in the letter to make sure that you don’t forget? The first principle, of course, is the importance of mindfulness, the ability to remember. That’s going to be your main protection. But then there’s the principle of where are the dangers in life? What are the real dangers? One of the principles he has is that what other people do to you is not nearly as dangerous as what they can get you to do. So this is a danger coming from outside. You have to be very careful about trying to protect what the Buddha identifies as virtue and as right view. If you can change your views to the point where you think that doing unskillful things is going to be fine or okay, or actually praiseworthy, then they’re really doing you a lot of damage. And what do they use to get you to do unskillful things? Well, it’s usually material possessions or threats about danger to your family, your health, your wealth. That’s another point the Buddha would say. Loss in terms of health, wealth, and even your relatives is not nearly as severe as loss in terms of virtue, loss in terms of right view. So what is right view that he would want you to know? It comes down to two things. One is the principle of action, that unskillful actions should always be avoided. Skillful actions should be developed. One of the few things the Buddha said was a categorical teaching. The other one was the Four Noble Truths. Where does suffering come from? It comes from within the mind. It’s an action in the mind that leads to suffering. So again, the dangers from outside are not nearly as bad as the dangers coming from inside. You’re the one who’s causing yourself to suffer. I’ve been reading several people saying that the Buddha wanted to get rid of suffering of all kinds. Which is true, but then how did he go about it? He basically said it’s the suffering that comes from clinging and craving. That’s the suffering he focuses on, because that’s the source of all of our other sufferings. So instead of trying to change the ways of the world outside, he said you’ve got to change the ways of your mind. And remember what your real duties are. One is to abandon unskillful qualities, unskillful actions. Two is to develop skillful ones. And then remember the duties of the Four Noble Truths, because these are duties in your own best interest. When suffering comes, you don’t try to run away from it. You don’t push it away. No, you don’t embrace it. You try to comprehend it and see exactly where the suffering is. There may be pain in the body, but it doesn’t have to come into the mind. What’s making the bridge? The Buddha identifies that as clinging. Clinging to the five aggregates, which are activities of the mind. We cling out of our desire for sensual pleasure. We cling out of our sense of our views of what the world is all about. We cling out of our old habits and practices. And we cling out of our sense of who we are. And whether we think who we are is a permanent self, or an impermanent self, or a separate self, or a joined self, any kind of activity of identification is going to make you suffer. So you try to comprehend that. And as you see the suffering, you begin to realize where it comes from. It comes from craving, and that’s what you abandon. All too often we try to abandon the suffering. Like I said, it’s like coming into a house that’s full of smoke. And you try to put out the smoke. We’re trying to push the suffering away. It’s like putting out the smoke, but without putting out the fire. There’s going to be more smoke all the time. You’ve got to find the fire. It’s the craving. That’s what you abandon. When you can do that, then you realize the third noble truth, which is the cessation of suffering. And you do that by developing the path. And it’s in developing the path that you become self-reliant. As the Buddha said, “If you can’t rely on yourself, who are you going to depend on?” Remember that conversation that Venerable Rathabala had with the king, Gauravya? One of the reasons that Rathabala left home was because he said, “The world has no shelter.” The king said, “What do you mean? I’ve got a palace.” Rathabala said, “Well, when you’re sick and people are standing around waiting for you to die, can you ask them, ‘Can you take out this pain and share it so I don’t feel so much pain?’” No, you face the pain alone. And so you need the skills to be with that pain and not suffer. That’s where the Buddha teaches the establishing of mindfulness. Mindfulness is the ability to remember when it needs to be established. Like that character in the book who had to figure out where in his memory he could stash that memory of the letter so it wouldn’t be erased. In this case, you stay with your breath. You stay with feelings, mind, these things in and of themselves as they are here right now. And as you get used to being here and used to thinking about skillful activities with regard to being right here, then these large parts of your memory go away, either through aging or through extreme emotions. The breath will still be here. It’ll be there to remind you. All the things you’ve learned to associate with the breath as you try to get the mind to settle down, be alert, ardent, they’re here in the breath. It’s like they’re buried here in the breath. And so as long as you stay in touch with this, it’ll remind you. You can settle down right here and realize that there are different aspects of being right here. You can be here with the body, you can be here with feelings, and you can choose which ones to focus on. So when there’s intense pain, you focus on the body. Remember, the body is one thing, the feeling is something else. Your awareness is something else. They come together right here. But when you can see that they’re separate right here, that’s your protection. You tune into the right aspect, tune into the right frame of reference. After all, the body is not the feeling. The feeling is pleasure or pain, neither pleasure nor pain. The body is sensations of solidity, warmth, coolness, energy. They’re something different. And the mind is what knows. They don’t know. The earth doesn’t know anything. Pain doesn’t know anything. It’s the mind that knows these things. It’s the awareness that knows these things. It’s something separate. It’s a different kind of thing. It’s just because they’re all here together in the same place that we tend to get them mixed up. And because we get them mixed up, this is why we cling to things that make us suffer. What if we could learn how to separate these things out? That’s when you can really be safe. So you’ve got to remember where the real dangers lie and where your potential for safety is, where your potential for protection is. They’re the things that people can do to you. But even worse is the things that you do if you’re not careful. But the things that you do can also be your protection, as long as you keep your virtue solid and keep your view straight. And you work on establishing mindfulness to the point of concentration. You’ve got your island inside, as the Buddha calls it. You can be your own island. The flood can come and go, but you’re safe. That’s what the Buddha would have put in the letter. So try to put that in the letter that you write to yourself for times when you’re going through difficult periods, when you’re afraid that your memory is going to go, or that you’re going to get into a really bad state of mind, or you start forgetting things. Stash this away in your breath. And as long as you’re there with the breath, the breath will be your reminder.

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