

The Choice Not to Suffer

May 5, 2011

The Buddha started and ended his teaching with the issue of how to put an end to suffering, and it's easy to agree with him that this is an important issue to address. Some people, though, wonder if that's all he addresses. Just put an end to suffering? What else is there? Aren't there bigger issues in life? Actually, it was a part of the Buddha's genius to realize that if you put an end to suffering, you learn a lot of other things about the mind. If you focus on the issue of suffering, a lot of things are brought right there together. Because right where there's feeling there's also attention and intention, perception—particularly intention. And when these issues are solved, everything important gets solved as well.

One of the big issues that really stares you in the face when you think about the Buddha's teaching on intention and causality—on how your intentions shape the world—is his insistence that events from the past continually have an influence on the present but not a total influence. You have some freedom of choice in the present moment. Where does that freedom of choice come from? What is that freedom? That's what you explore when you meditate.

You've got lots of potentials coming up from the past, things that you could obsess about to make yourself thoroughly miserable but also potentials for pleasure. If you focus on the good potentials, you can make yourself happy. You have the choice and there's some freedom in there. In fact, the more you exercise that freedom in a skillful way, the more you see of the mind's greater potential for freedom. Because this is what everything is aimed at: freedom. Total freedom.

A small taste of freedom in the present moment—conditioned freedom—lies in noticing when we have freedom of choice to go one way or another. Most of us don't take advantage of that. We have old habits, old feeding habits, and we just keep feeding away, the way we always have been without really thinking about it. Which means we stay in our old ruts.

The Buddha said that he himself got onto the path to the end of suffering when he noticed that he could choose which way to think, and that his thoughts fell into two sorts. There were thoughts that led to harm for himself and for others, and there were thoughts that led to no harm for anyone. The first type of thoughts were thoughts imbued with sensuality—i.e. sensual desire, sensual passion—ill-will, and cruelty. The second type were the thoughts that weren't under the power of any of these things. He realized that he could exert some control to stop the unskillful thoughts. He could beat them back, as he said.

He compared it to being a cowherd. Back in those days, you had a small herds of cattle and during the rainy season you wanted to make sure they didn't get into your neighbors' rice fields. Otherwise, there would be trouble. If you saw them heading off into the rice fields, you'd have to beat them back. And he realized that he could do the same with his unskillful thoughts.

Skillful thoughts didn't have any drawbacks aside from the fact they could make you tired. And the issue when you get tired is that it's very hard to fight off the unskillful thoughts. So with that realization, he learned to bring the mind into concentration as a way of giving the mind a place to rest, and giving it a standpoint from which he could watch those thoughts. Because the only way you're going to be able to see thoughts as events is if you're able to step outside them and not get sucked into their worlds. Because once you're in a world, you see everything colored by the opinions of that world, the values of that world. So you need a place where you can step outside.

This is what we're doing as we develop the path.

Notice that when the Buddha talked about suffering, he didn't stop with suffering. He taught four noble truths. First you try to comprehend the suffering to see what it's like, to see what it really is like to suffer, what's actually happening when you're suffering, what's happening around the pain. Then you look for the mind's actions that give rise to mental suffering. When you see them, you let them go. To do that requires strength—to be able to sit long enough with the pain, with the stress, with the suffering so that you can really see it. The only way you can do that is if you don't feel threatened by it. So you need a standpoint, and that's what the path—and in particular, right concentration—provides. That's why we develop the path.

We're not here just to look willy-nilly at whatever comes up. We have to realize that there are potentials here in the present moment that can strengthen us, that can give us a sense of well-being. One, so that we don't just get sucked in to unskillful thoughts, and two, so that we can analyze them, observe them from outside. So this teaching on learning how to abandon unskillful thoughts is to allow skillful thoughts to develop, within reason, but also to find a place for the mind to settle down and stay with concentration, mindfulness, alertness.

This parallels to the Buddha's more formal teachings. One is the relationship between what he calls mundane right resolve and transcendent right resolve. Mundane right resolve is simply the determination not to give in to sensuality. You're not going to give in to ill-will or cruelty, or any other factors that create unskillful thoughts. Transcendent right resolve is when you bring the mind into a state of concentration where you really have put sensuality aside—as they say,

you're secluded from sensuality. Sensual thoughts simply don't impinge on the mind at that point. You're not interested. You've got something better.

But the Buddha's description of his way of dealing with these thoughts also parallels the seven factors for awakening. You keep in mind that you don't want to get sucked in to your thoughts, and so you develop mindfulness but staying focused on the breath, or the body in and of itself, as your frame of reference. Any thoughts that would pull you into thought worlds you put aside. If you get worked up about something that you want in the world, or that has you upset about the world, just put it aside. Learn how to not get into that thought world.

It's like seeing a dream world come up in your mind, and you realize, "Hey, this is a dream." If you let yourself get into it, you forget that you're in a dream. You can get happy or sad, entertained or frightened, by the events in the dream, but then there comes a point that when you realize, "Hey, this is a dream," and you wake up. Those are the worlds in the mind. Sometimes it's hard to tell that they're dreams because they correspond to issues that are actually happening outside, in your daily life.

But the Buddha says that, for the sake of learning how not to get sucked into them, you have to realize that each thought world is "just a world" and learn to think of it as "just a world." You've actually got something bigger than the world in here, you've got the issues of your own mind. We tend to make the world bigger than us, but we have to learn how to make this question of how to overcome suffering bigger than the world.

That's what we're doing as we try to maintain this frame of reference, the breath in and of itself. And based on that, you see things arising and passing away, thoughts arising and passing away, and you learn how to judge them as skillful or not.

That's the second factor for awakening. It's called analysis of qualities. You see the qualities that surround your thinking. When there's greed, aversion, or delusion, you recognize them as unskillful thoughts. You're seeing them simply as events, part of a process. You're not concerned about how well they're representing the world to you, or whether they're telling you something you need to get worked up about. For the time being, you're not involved. It's just, "That's a thought." And like the cow herder, if it's an unskillful thought, you learn to keep it in check.

This is the effort, or the persistence, which is the third factor for awakening. If you really stick with this, you can bring the mind to states of concentration, the concentration you need in order to maintain this stance of being able to step outside your thoughts. In the factors of awakening, this concentration is described

as four of the factors: rapture, serenity, concentration, and equanimity. These are the qualities you need to gain the strength not to get sucked in, so that you can maintain that stance of learning how to abandon anything that's unskillful.

You have your own separate place to stay so that when suffering or stress—any kind of dis-ease—comes up in the mind, you don't have to feel threatened by it. You can look at it, recognize it as an event, and not get tied into the narratives or story lines, that this is about your family, this is about your co-workers, this is about your... whatever. It's a thought. It's a mental event. If you recognize it as unskillful, then you try to draw on whatever resources you've developed through your meditation to pull yourself out. At the very least, you're able not to fall under its power. At best, you learn how to understand it: where it's coming from, what kind of assumptions it's based on.

When the Buddha talks about events in the mind, he focuses on the cluster of intention, attention, perception, and feeling. So try to analyze your thoughts in those terms. Learn to look for the perceptions, the mental labels. How are you labeling the issue? That's the perception. What do you want out of the issue? That's the intention. What are you paying attention to? The Buddha recommends that you pay attention just to this issue: stress and its ending. Where is the stress? Watch it, comprehend it. Figure out what the cause is so that you can abandon it. Realize you don't have to suffer from this stress.

This is why the Buddha puts the cessation of stress third there in the four noble truths. Some people wonder: Why didn't the Buddha put the path as the third truth, and then the cessation of stress as the fourth truth? Well, to have energy to follow the path, you have to be convinced that it is possible to get beyond the stress, the suffering. Just as when a doctor says "Okay, it is possible to be cured of this disease," you're willing to listen to the course of treatment, because sometimes those courses of treatment can be pretty daunting. If you're not convinced that they're actually going to cure you, you're not going to want to follow them.

So, the Buddha says "Whatever suffering is weighing down the mind is totally unnecessary. It can be cured. It can be ended." That gives you the energy to develop all the qualities required by the path. It'll give you the strength, it'll give you the powers of endurance so that when an issue that you don't understand comes up, you can watch it for however long it takes. All this is called appropriate attention.

The Buddha tends to tie those two qualities together: the set of seven factors for awakening and appropriate attention. Appropriate attention is what develops all of the factors. Because that's what analysis of qualities is: paying appropriate

attention to these issues of skillful and unskillful thoughts, and what can be done with them in a way that finally uproots them. This includes the qualities that you need to develop, in order to have the strength to watch these things, have the strength to abandon the unskillful things that you've been doing for so long. After all, this is a task that does take strong resolve. Many are the times when you've pulled out all the tricks you've learned from the Buddha about how to deal with, say, lust or anger, and none of them seem to be working. There's still a strong insistence in the mind. It just wants to go in these directions—it gives you no reason, though, just strong, strong, strong desire. Well, you have to be strong in your resistance.

This is why conviction is such an important part of the path—conviction that the Buddha really did know what he was talking about, that you'll be better off if you don't give in to these unskillful thoughts.

So it's useful to reflect on the analysis that the Buddha said got him started on the path: recognizing that he could see his thoughts as events, as factors leading either to happiness or to suffering. He saw that he could step back from his thinking, that he had the freedom to choose what kind of thinking he was going to follow.

That's an important assumption right there. The Buddha regarded it as so important that it was the one issue over which he would actually seek out and argue with other teachers; teachers who taught determinism, that everything was totally predetermined, that there's nothing you can do, or that everything in the world was so chaotic that there was no pattern of cause and effect that you could figure out. He'd actually seek those teachers out to refute them, because the principle that you do have freedom of choice is so central to putting an end to suffering. He said "If you can't take that as your assumption, you're left bewildered and without protection".

This relates to his analysis of how people react to suffering: They get bewildered by their suffering and they look to somebody else to help them find a way out. But if you assume that nothing can be done about suffering, that's it. You stay bewildered and you have no protection. But if you're convinced that you do have this freedom to choose—that there's an element of choice in your suffering and you can choose not to suffer—that opens the way out. Of course, simply making the choice is not enough. You have to build on it all the other skills of learning how to watch, learning how to develop concentration. Those are all necessary but they build on that conviction that you do have this freedom to choose not to suffer.

And as you explore your freedom, the element of choice you have in the

present moment, you find it that it opens up into deeper kinds of freedom—what the Buddha calls a deathless dimension. It's totally free of stress and lies totally beyond space and time. If you dig into the issue of suffering—and you do it skillfully—you open up to this much larger issue as well.

Often we come to the practice concerned about issues in our family, issues at work, hoping just to straighten out our lives on an ordinary level. But the Buddha says that as you straighten out those issues, you can dig deeper into the underlying issue: “Why is there suffering? What can be done about it?” And you'll find that if you keep pursuing this issue with your discernment, it takes you really far.