

A Handful of Leaves

October 23, 2021

The Buddha was in a forest one time, picked up a handful of leaves, and asked the monks, “Which is greater? The leaves in my hand or the leaves in the forest?”

Of course, the monks said, “The leaves in the forest are much greater.”

In the same way, the Buddha said, what he had learned through direct knowledge was like the leaves in the forest; what he taught was just the handful of leaves. The reason he taught that handful of leaves was because it would be useful for the sake of gaining liberation. As for the leaves in the forest, they weren’t useful for that purpose.

And what was in the handful of leaves? The four noble truths. This is one of the Buddha’s teachings that’s categorical—in other words, it’s true across the board, for everybody—and he chose these leaves because they were going to be beneficial.

So you have to stop and think: There’s a lot the Buddha knew in his awakening that he never told anybody. There have been attempts over the centuries to fill in the blanks, but we have to remember that his purpose in teaching was to be helpful—to provide views that would be useful for the mind, views that had purpose. The Pāli word is *attha*, which means not only “purpose,” but also “meaning,” “benefit,” “goal”.

After all, the mind has its purposes. It creates views for certain purposes; it doesn’t sit there and gaze in rapt admiration of views. It creates them, it uses them, and it acts on them. So the Buddha realized that views had to be viewed in terms of where they came from in the mind—what mind states inspired them—and where they led.

As he taught, he realized that different teachings were going to be suitable for different people. In addition to the four noble truths, though—the truths that are true across the board—there’s the truth that skillful qualities should be developed and unskillful qualities should be abandoned. This truth, too, is categorical. Then, toward the end of his life, he called the monks together and taught them the seven sets of dhammas that are wings to awakening. Those can be taken as the truths that everybody needs to know as well. Beyond that, it’s a matter of what kind of person you are.

There was another time when a horse trainer came to see the Buddha and told him that he had three ways of training horses: One was to be gentle; the second was to be harsh; and the third was to combine gentleness with harshness. If none

of those three methods worked, he killed the horse, just to maintain his reputation as a good horse trainer.

The Buddha said that in the same way, he had four ways of teaching—three ways of teaching plus the fourth those who didn't benefit from the teaching: The first was to teach in a gentle way; the second was to teach in a harsh way; the third was to teach both gently and harshly. And then, if none of those methods worked, he stopped teaching that person, which, as he said, was the same as killing that person. But what could he do?

So you have to ask yourself, which kind of horse are you? Some people respond to gentle teachings. The Buddha said that teaching about skillful qualities, teaching about heaven, teaching about positive things: That's the gentle teaching. Teaching about hell, teaching about the animal realms, teaching about unskillful qualities and how they should be abandoned: That's a harsh teaching.

We all may like the gentle teaching, but you have to see what impact it has on your mind when you focus on it, realizing that different teachings will be useful for you at different times. We have to counteract the tendency to want to take on the whole body of teachings all at once.

It's worth noting that what the Buddha taught in detail was about the workings of the mind. As for the cosmos out there, what teaches is pretty much a sketch. And as for his narratives, he told little bits and pieces of his own life—mainly his quest for awakening. Beyond that, we learn bits and snatches here and there, but there's no full biography of the Buddha or any of his noble disciples. And there's no full picture of the history of the cosmos—at least not in the Canon.

Now, the commentaries try to fill in the blanks, but you might want to stop and ask, "What was the Buddha's *purpose* in teaching these things?" Basically, just enough to know that there are these possibilities in the cosmos, but he didn't want to go into too great detail on the issue because he wanted people to use that knowledge to look into their minds. After all, where does the cosmos come from? It comes from your actions. That's the real emphasis, and this is where the Buddha goes into a lot of detail—on the psychology of action—because that's where his real interest lies.

So, as we hear about the heavens, hear about the hells, you have to ask yourself: Which kind of horse are you? Are you the kind of horse that needs a little bit of a kick? Or do you respond better to gentle treatment? Sometimes those who respond to gentle treatment will not respond to harsh treatment. It gets them too worked up, too worried. So you think back on the Buddha's handful of leaves. Is this particular part of that handful useful for you?

Think of it as medicine. The implications of this image may have been more direct for his listeners than it is now, because a lot of medicines back in those days *were* leaves. There was the famous story of Jivaka, the doctor, who was learning medicine. After seven years, he was wondering if there was ever going to be an end to what he was learning, so he asked his teacher, “Where’s the end to this knowledge?”

The teacher told him, “Take a basket and some scissors, and go around the city at a radius of one league,” which is about sixteen kilometers, “and, if within that radius you see any plant that’s not medicinal, bring it back.”

Jivaka went around, he came back, and he said, “There’s nothing that’s not medicine. Everything has a medicinal use.” That, the teacher said, was a sign that he was ready to be a doctor.

So the leaves in the Buddha’s hand may have reminded his listeners: These leaves stand for medicine.

You want to make sure that the medicine is right for your disease, right for your constitution. Sometimes the disease requires strong medicine; sometimes it requires weak medicine. Sometimes a disease in some people will require strong medicine, but in other people that medicine will kill them, so you have to try another approach.

So, as you go through reading the Buddha’s teachings, remember you’re basically eavesdropping on the Buddha teaching other people. Whether he would have designed that particular teaching for you, it’s hard to tell. This is where you have to be really honest in observing yourself. If you focus on that teaching, where does it take you? What does it do to the mind? If it gives you a sense of just enough heedfulness to make you want to put the book down and to practice, that’s fine. If it gets you too worked up, put it aside.

Because this is all aimed at getting the mind to settle down—to be at its ease here in the present moment, but watchful in the present moment as well, realizing that everything that’s going to happen in your life will come out of the mind in the present moment, so this is where you want to stay. If anything is going to come up, it’s going to come up here.

It’s like that experiment I read about in Antarctica. One time on an ice sheet, they cut a hole that was a long distance away from open water, and they figured that any penguin under the ice sheet was going to have to come up through that hole. And they *would* come up. The experiment they did was to empty out the penguins—that is, they turned them upside down to empty their stomachs, to see what they’d been eating, which was quite a shock to the penguins. Then they let the penguins rest, and they sent them back down the hole. The point is, all the

penguins in that area, if they were going to come up, they were going to have to come up through that hole.

In the same way, everything that you're going to have to know about the mind is going to have to appear in the present moment. So you want to be able to stay here with a sense of alertness and a sense of ease—and that requires balance.

Sometimes you need to remind yourself to be heedful of the dangers if you don't accomplish the meditation; other times, you have to remind yourself of what a good thing it is that you're simply meditating. You're here, you're not harming anybody, you're looking for happiness in a noble way.

In other words, you have to learn how to read yourself, which is probably what the Buddha wanted anyhow. After all, we don't just parrot his discernment. He wasn't the type of teacher who had a set creed that he would have everybody repeat and that he would repeat to everybody. He would give people teachings right for them, and have them go off and put them into practice, and then reflect to see what results they were getting.

As you learn how to observe yourself, that's where your discernment really gets useful, in that it can take you beyond what you've read in what the Buddha said, what you've read from the ajans. It makes the Dhamma your own.

At the same time, it focuses on where the real problem is. The problem isn't in trying to figure out which of the Buddha's teachings is right for you. The problem is that you're sitting here thinking and using your mind in ways that are causing lots of unnecessary stress and suffering. So you want to look right here so that you can solve the problem right here. It's simply a matter of trying to find the right balance of stillness and confidence on the one hand, and the need to be alert, to be looking all around, centered but with an all-around knowledge, an all-around awareness on the other. That's the quality you want to develop.

So look for which of the Buddha's teachings help you in that direction. As for the others, tell yourself, "Maybe that's medicine for somebody else, or maybe it's medicine for some other time." Take what's really useful for you, right here and right now.