

Get Out of Yourself

December 28, 2021

There's that famous line at the beginning of *Anna Karenina* where Tolstoy says that happy families are all alike, whereas each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. He then proceeds to write a novel of hundreds of pages about some very, very unhappy families, focused on the particulars of why they were unhappy. The implication seems to be that the things people have in common when they're happy or unhappy are not really of interest. What's of interest is the particulars of our own suffering, or other people's suffering. But from the Buddha's point of view, he's got it backwards.

Think about the Buddha on the night of his awakening. His first knowledge was of his previous lifetimes—a lot of particulars: where he was born, what he looked like, what kind of being he was, what he ate, his pleasures and pains, and how he died. But he realized that that knowledge, getting into the particulars, was not the solution to his problem. He was curious about why was it that what he had changed so much. Was there a pattern to it?

Then on the second watch of the night he expanded his mind. He got out of himself and started looking at all beings. He found that what we had in common was that we all have karma, our intentional actions.

Now, the workings of karma can be very complex, but they determine where we go, what we are, and what we become. He realized that the big issue was action, and the general pattern of action was something we all have in common. Then, in the third watch of the night, he expressed the knowledge he gained, not in terms of "I did this," or "I did that," but simply: "This is suffering, this is the origination of suffering, this is the cessation of suffering, this is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. These are the duties that have to be done with regard to those four noble truths."

He'd been able to get out of himself and then came back, seeing himself in terms of what we have in common. That was what enabled him to gain awakening. He depersonalized the issue of suffering, and in that way he was able to get a handle on it.

This is a theme we see throughout the practice. Here we are, focusing on our own breath, but stop and think about it: Everybody else has a breath just like yours. There may be slight variations, but the Buddha said that when you're practicing mindfulness, you should practice

being aware of the body internally and also externally; being aware of feelings internally and externally; being aware of the mind, mental qualities internally and externally.

Now, if you interpret mindfulness simply as being aware, that sounds very strange: You're supposed to sit next to someone else and hear them breathe? How are you going to feel their feelings, or be aware of their mind-states? But when you remember that mindfulness is a faculty of the memory, something you keep in mind, then you can see what the Buddha's getting at. You focus on issues in your own feelings, issues in your own mind, issues in your own body, and you stop to remember, "This is the way it is with everybody." Everybody has a breath, everybody has feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. And all the various mind states that you can be mindful of, skillful and unskillful: Everybody else has those, too.

This is a good way of getting yourself out of yourself, because when things go down—particularly when the mind turns into a whirlpool and keeps going around and around and around on certain themes—as it goes around, it just gets pulled down. That's because you've restricted your awareness just to what's in your mind. But if you can lasso out, grab hold of something outside, you begin to realize that what you're experiencing is not just you. You're not the only one who suffers in the world. Lots of other people are suffering, sometimes a lot worse than you are.

The proper response to this is, first, compassion. You realize that it really does hurt, so other people really hurt, too. The next response is *sarivvega*: Is this all we have? Is this all there is to life? In response to that, the Buddha offers *pasada*, confidence that there is a way out, through learning how to look at events in your mind. This is why we practice concentration, focusing on the level of intentions and attention, the raw material we use to put together states of becoming in the mind.

You can look at these events from a more impersonal standpoint, a much larger standpoint, and that gets you out of them. As the Buddha said, the essence of discernment is seeing things as separate. An important part of seeing them as separate is seeing them as separate from you. In other words, there are these events in the mind, but you don't have to identify with them. You can study them from an outside perspective.

So it's important as we meditate that we don't just think about ourselves. We also have to think about others. You see this pattern again and again in the Buddha's teachings. Think of the five reflections that we have as a common chant: "I am subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation from all that is dear and appealing to me. I am the owner

of my actions.”

The Buddha says that as you reflect in that way, it gives you motivation to become more and more skillful in what you do. But he doesn't leave the reflection there. He has you reflect not only on “me,” but also on the fact that *all beings everywhere*, on every level of the cosmos, are subject to aging, illness, death, separation, and they have their karma. Think about that: everybody, no matter what they are, from hell-beings all the way up through the highest levels of heaven. There's nobody in charge, nobody in the universe who lies above the laws of karma. The only ones who are free are the arahants. Everybody else is trapped.

So when you think about the particulars of your situation, realize that they're not that much different from anybody else's. This is why the emphasis on what makes us different from one another is so opposed to the principles of the Dhamma. The principles of the Dhamma are what we have in common: the fact that we're all suffering, that suffering comes from the same sorts of things, and that the path to the end of suffering comes from the same sorts of things.

For this reason, we don't focus so much on the particulars of our own sufferings, but look instead for the common pattern. That way when we get out of ourselves, we can get a better perspective on what really needs to be done, what *can* be done. And it takes a lot of sting out of our own suffering, too. Because one of the hardest parts about suffering is the sense of “Why is this happening to me? It's not happening to anybody else. Why am I the one that the universe seems to be picking out and dumping on?” But then you stop and reflect: You're not the only one.

There was the case where King Pasenadi was having an audience with the Buddha, and one of his courtiers came up and whispered into his ear that his favorite queen, Mallikā, had died. The king just broke down and cried. The Buddha said to him, “When has it ever been the case that someone who been born doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die?” This happens to everybody.

You would think the grief of one person dying would not be helped by thinking of all the other people who've been dying, that all that additional suffering would be even a heavier burden, but the mathematics of the mind don't work that way. The heaviest sufferings are the ones where you feel that you're the only one who's suffering in this way. You get yourself out of the line of fire when you realize that other people are suffering this way, too. Other beings are suffering, sometimes worse—in fact a lot of them are suffering worse. And that lightens things:

The universe isn't dumping on you particularly. You're just experiencing something that we all have in common. That thought helps pull you out of the whirlpool.

Because our thoughts, when they get into whirlpools like that, just go around and around and around. Thought *a* leads to *b*, leads to *c*, leads to *d*, then leads back to *a*, and it just goes around in circles like this, as the circle spiral downwards. But when you start thinking about other people and get out of yourself, it cuts the cycle. The Buddha is throwing you a lifeline, so you can pull yourself out.

So it's good to think in these terms, to get out of yourself every now and then. This is one of the reasons why we have thoughts of goodwill, thoughts of compassion, thoughts of empathetic joy, thoughts of equanimity for all beings as a daily practice. We can just chant the words to the point where it doesn't mean anything, but stop and think: There are a lot of beings out there who are suffering right now. In fact, everybody who's not an arahant is suffering in one way or another, and that calls for compassion.

This is a world of suffering people. Some people wear their suffering on their sleeves; other people hide it, but it's there. Some people are very much aware of how they're suffering, other people are not so much aware, but we all have this in common.

This was the genius of the Buddha, to see what we all have in common by looking into his own mind, but also referring to the fact that everybody else has the same sorts of things.

Think about his teaching on the five aggregates. It's not just your aggregates that are inconstant, stressful, and not self. Everybody's, no matter where, are not worth holding onto as you or yours. You could go anywhere—you could be born as a deva, you could be born as a Brahmā—but that's all they have: these aggregates. The Brahmās get to stay around a little bit longer, quite a bit longer, but still, their position isn't stable. It's going to fall apart someday. And sometimes the beings that are very high are going to fall very far and very hard.

So, we're all in this together, and it's good to keep that in mind. This is why the Buddha says to be mindful of the body internally and externally, feelings internally and externally, mind internally and externally. It helps you give a perspective on your sufferings. That way, instead of focusing on the particulars, you can focus on what we all have in common. And that, the Buddha said, is where the work can be done.

That's how we get out. All those who finally gain release all go to the same thing: total release. It's not the case that the Buddha had a special release, and the arahants had a different release. The arahants had their particular talents, the Buddha of course had his talents, but

when it came to release, everybody was equal. Everybody was the same.

That was because they saw the pattern in the mind that's the same for everybody: This is how suffering happens. This is what suffering is: It's clinging to the aggregates. The cause is the three kinds of craving. The cessation is getting dispassion for those three kinds of craving, and you do that by developing the noble eightfold path. And it's the same path for everybody.

So when you start looking for what we have in common, that's how you find the way out. If you stay stuck on the particulars, it might make an interesting novel, but we're here for more than fiction. We're here for the truth, and the best truth is the truth that sets us free.