

The Buddha's Letter

September 6, 2018

I've told you about the character in the book *The 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 in the organization that kidnapped him, and he becomes a troublemaker. So they have to erase his memory. Now, they can't erase all of his memory, or otherwise he'd be totally non-functional. So they erase the major part. This happens to him several times in the book and, over time, he figures out which part of his memory is going to be saved.

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."

In the letter, he writes a longer message to himself about the things he wants to make sure he doesn't forget, that they're trying to make him forget.

So the question is, suppose the Buddha were to write that letter and 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 there the dangers in life? And what are the real dangers?

One of the Buddha's basic principles 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 they can change your views to the point where you think that doing unskillful things is going to be fine 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? Usually it's threats to your material possessions, or threats about danger to your family, your health, your wealth. But 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 the 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. That's one of the few things the Buddha said was a categorical teaching. The other categorical teaching 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, external and internal, which is true, but then how did he go about it? He focused on the causes inside,

because that's where actual suffering comes from: from clinging and craving. That's where he focuses his cure, 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 to remember what your real duties are.

First, abandon unskillful qualities, unskillful actions, and develop skillful ones. Then remember the duties of the four noble truths, because these duties are in your own best interest.

When suffering comes, you don't try to run away from it. You don't push it away. But you also don't embrace it. You try to comprehend it and see exactly where the actual suffering lies.

There may be pain in the body, but it doesn't have to come into the mind. It comes because there's a bridge—the bridge of craving and 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 views of what the world is all about. We cling out of our old habits and practices. And we cling to our sense of who we are. And whether we think “who we are” is a permanent self or an impermanent self, a separate self or an interconnected self, it's all a kind of activity, and the act of identification is going to make you suffer, regardless.

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. It's like coming into your house and finding that it's full of smoke—so you try to put out the smoke. When we try to push the suffering away, it's like putting out the smoke 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, the cessation of suffering, which comes from the cessation of craving. In other words, you put out the fire and the smoke disappears on its own. And you put out the fire by developing the path.

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 Ratthapala had with King Koravya about why he left home to become a monk. And one of the reasons was because the world has no shelter.

“No,” the king said, “What do you mean? I've got a palace to protect me.”

And Ratthapala said, “When you're sick, and people are standing around waiting for you to die, can you order them to take out your pain and share it so that you don't have to bear so much?”

No. You face the pain alone. That's when you need the skills to be with that pain and not suffer.

That's where the Buddha teaches the establishing of mindfulness. Remember, mindfulness is the ability to remember. And one of the things you need to remember is where to establish your memory, like that character in the book who had to figure out where in his memory he could stash his memory of the letter so that it wouldn't be erased.

In your case, you stay with the breath, you stay with feelings, the mind—any of these things, in and of themselves, as they're here right now.

As you get used to being here and used to thinking about skillful activities with regard to being right here, then as large parts of your memory go away—either through aging or through extreme emotions—the breath will still be here to remind you.

All of the things you've learned to associate with the breath as you try to get the mind to settle down—to be alert, ardent—they're *here* in the breath. It's as if they're buried here in the breath. So as long as you stay in touch with the breath, it can 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, you can be with your present mind state. And you can choose which of those to focus on.

For example, when there's intense pain, you focus on the body. Remember: The body's one thing, the feeling is something else. Your awareness is something else. They can occupy the same place right here, but when you can see that they're separate right here, that's your protection.

You tune into the right aspect, into the right frame of reference. After all, the body is not the feeling. The feeling is pleasure or pain or neither pleasure nor pain. The body is sensations of solidity, warmth, coolness, energy. They're something different. And the mind is what knows. Those other things: They don't know. Earth doesn't know anything. Pain doesn't know anything.

The mind is what knows these things. The awareness is what knows these things. It's something separate. It's a different kind of thing entirely. 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, we cling to things that make us suffer. But if you can 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. There are the bad things that people can do to you, but even worse are the things that you do to yourself 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 your views straight, and you work on establishing mindfulness to the point of concentration. That way, you've got your island inside, as the Buddha calls it. You can be your own island. The floods can come and go, but you're safe.

That's what the Buddha would have put in a letter.

So try to put that in a letter that you write to yourself, for the times when you're going through difficult periods, when you're afraid that your memory is going to go, or when you're in a really bad emotional state where you start forgetting things. And stash this letter away in your breath. Then, as long as you're there with the breath, the breath will be your reminder.