

Dharma Medicine

July 14, 2008

There's a passage in the Canon, where a prince comes to the Buddha with a trick question: Would the Buddha ever say anything displeasing to other people? And the trick to the question was this: If the Buddha said Yes, then the prince could respond, "Well, how are you any different from anyone else? What's so awakened about you?" And if the Buddha said No, they could catch him in a lie because he had said some displeasing things to his cousin who had tried to take over the Sangha—called him a lickspittle, one of those great words that we have somehow lost.

So the prince comes to him, sits down. He has his baby son on his lap, the idea being that if the conversation gets to a point where the prince suddenly finds himself in a bad spot, he'll pinch the baby, the baby will cry, and that will put an end to the discussion.

But when the prince asks the question, the Buddha steps out of the trap, saying that there's no categorical answer to that question. Instead, he gives an analytical answer, but before he does that, he cross-questions the prince: Suppose your baby son put a pottery shard in his mouth. What would you do? The prince says, "I'd crook my finger and get it out of his mouth, even if it meant drawing blood. Because that would be better than what would happen if the child swallowed it." In the same way, the Buddha said, there are times you have to say displeasing things to head people off from something even more dangerous.

Then he gave his analytical answer. Before saying anything, he would consider: One, is it true? Two, is it beneficial? And three, is it timely? And only if it passed all three questions would he say it.

This is an important principal to keep in mind when we read the Buddha's teachings and try to apply them in our own practice.

There are lots of true things in the suttas. Sometimes they seem, though, to be working at cross purposes to one another. So you have to figure out which particular teaching is timely for you. Keep this in mind. Basically the Buddha's thinking like a doctor. He's got medicine, and it's genuine medicine, but you have to be careful that the medicine really is beneficial. There are times when one medicine may be good for you although it may not be good for you at another time.

Years back, I went to India, came back to Thailand and had to be hospitalized for a relapse of malaria. They discovered that along with the malaria I had picked up giardiasis. So they gave me medicine from Roche, the Swiss drug maker. After a couple of weeks in the hospital, the malaria case subsided, but I still had the problem with the giardiasis. Ajaan Fuang had a couple of nurses as students, so I asked them what I should do, and they said, well, first let's check the medicine. One of the nurses had a friend who worked in a pharmaceutical organization who

tested the medicine, and she came back with the report that was cornstarch. It wasn't even genuine medicine. Somebody in Thailand had copied the Roche drug and sold it to the hospital.

So that's the first lesson: You want to make sure the medicine is genuine medicine, and then that it's really beneficial. There are some chemicals that are genuine but they're not going to help you. And even then, you have to think: Is this the right time to give this medicine?

In the same way, the Buddha's teachings are intended as medicine. The Buddha often talked to himself as a doctor, treating the ills of peoples' minds. But now the doctor's gone away, but he has left his medical textbooks for you to train yourself, to be your own physician.

The textbooks are augmented with case studies. This is part of the wisdom of the suttas: We get to see the Buddha in action, seeing what kind of person he would apply what kind of teaching to, what the circumstances would be. That way, you get some idea about who and what a particular teaching was for. The Buddha wasn't like a college professor, trying to set out an outline to cover the whole subject, saying this is the truth and it's all a neat tidy system. Instead, he was offering medicines and trying to give you some idea of when and where to apply them.

This is why it's important to have a teacher as you practice, and hopefully the teacher has picked up some sense of the right time and right place for different teachings. By hanging around the teacher, you begin to get a sense of that as well, but there's a lot of it that depends on your own powers of observation. And remember that even a lot of the teachings that may seem very abstract are intended as medicine: for example, the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness.

This is the Buddha's analysis of suffering. When you suffer, there is going to be clinging to one of these five things. So it's useful to look at whatever the suffering is in these terms, whether it's an uncomfortable experience in the body, or an uncomfortable state of mind, or both of them together. Try to take it apart into its components to see which part is the problem. Are you clinging to a particular sense of the form of the body? Are you clinging to a particular feeling?

Now, "clinging," here, may mean holding on to it not so much because you like it, but because you're entangled in it. Sometimes you cling to painful feelings because you want to change them.

Then there's perception. How do you perceive the situation? What labels are you applying to this, and are they helpful?

Fabrication: What stories are you creating around the situation?

And then there's just simple consciousness that's aware of these things, through the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, or through the mind.

This form of analysis is meant to be used as medicine so that you can take these things apart. That way, your sufferings are not so overwhelming. Instead of being faced with a huge

cliff of rock, a huge mass of suffering, you chop it up into little bits of gravel. You see it: “Simply because I was perceiving it in a particular way, that was causing the problem.”

This is why we spend so much time in concentration practice, because as the Buddha said, concentration is a perception attainment. You stay centered by holding a particular perception in mind. You try to sort through all the possible perceptions you can apply to what you’re experiencing right now to see if there’s one with which you can settle down and have a sense of ease.

So when things are hellish in your body or hellish in your mind, you can start questioning your perceptions. Can you replace those perceptions with other ones? If there’s a perception of pain, you can ask yourself, “Where’s the pleasure here?” Because pain and pleasure are intertwined. As one of the Buddha’s nun disciples, Sister Dhammadinna, said, pleasure is pleasant in remaining and painful in changing; pain is painful in remaining and pleasant in changing. So even in pain, there’s going to be some aspect of pleasure. Try to look for it. The perception is what opens up the possibility in your mind, that even amidst of pain, there can be pleasure: Look for that.

When the body seems like a big mass of rock, remind yourself: There’s energy flowing through the body; there’s space between all the atoms. Try to hold that perception in mind. When the breath seems difficult, remind yourself, there already is breath energy in the body. What you feel in the body right now is breath energy flowing in the body. So it’s already flowing. Maybe in your effort to breathe in a particular way based on the perception of how you think the breath should go, you’re actually blocking a more comfortable way of breathing, a more comfortable way of letting the breath flow through the body. In other words, try to see what perception is most helpful, most soothing—what perception can be your medicine right now.

Those three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self, are intended to be used in the same way.

As the sutta we chanted just now says, these things are true, but then the next question comes, are they beneficial right now? Is it the right time to be thinking about them? What’s the best way to apply them? It’s like a medicine: Is this a medicine that you should eat, or rub on your skin, or should you have it injected into your blood?

When something seems difficult, sometimes it’s good to remind yourself, “This is inconstant.” This doesn’t refer just to the fact that it’s going to end in a couple hours or a couple years. It’s actually changing right now. It’s unstable right now.

In the same way, the Buddha’s teachings on the elements is helpful. If you’ve got a pain in the body, remind yourself that body sensations are of a certain type—what they call the four elements of earth, water, wind, and fire, or a sense of solidity, liquidity, movement, and warmth—and the pain is something else. As I’ve said before, we have a tendency to glom the pain onto the solid parts, so that the pain seems solid. But pain is not solid. It’s a feeling tone. Solid is

form. Try to distinguish between the two. Not because some books says that this is what reality is, but as the Buddha said, these are useful perceptions for dividing things up.

That's what discernment is. It's learning, one, how to divide things up and two, to see what happens when you do. That way, you can see which form of perception is really helpful right now, why it's timely to apply it, because even though the three perceptions are, as the Buddha said, always true, there are times when they're not actually all that timely. When you're practicing concentration, you don't want to say, "Well, everything is stressful and not-self, so I may as well not try to create a state of concentration." That's not the right time to use that particular medicine. At that point, you want to focus on how constant you can make your state of mind, how pleasant you can make it, and how much you can bring it under your control. When the Buddha talks about issues of self, we tend to think of the self as a thing, but he saw it more as an activity. You *make* a sense of mind; you *make* a sense of I.

There are times when your I and your mine can be skillful and times when they're not. The type of activity that creates a sense of self is where you have a sense of control. That's self-activity or selfing, and you do have a certain measure of control. You can decide to focus on the breath; you can decide to wander away. You can train yourself to get better at this. There are limits on the amount of control that you can exert, but you learn to play within the limits. Move them in the direction where you want them to go. Meanwhile, you apply the perceptions of inconstancy, stress and not-self to any thoughts that would pull you away—and also, when it's appropriate, to give yourself a sense of patience. You can't totally control this. You've got to learn how to figure out how cause and effect work right now, and what limits they place on you. How can you use them to your advantage?

So as you meditate here, think of yourself as a medical student. You're learning to become a doctor for your own mind. The medicines are all laid out. First you want to make sure they are genuine medicines, that they're true. Then secondly, are they beneficial for you? And then thirdly, is this the right time for them? Try to get a sense through practice of which perceptions, which ways of looking at things, are useful for the particular problem right now. Because if you just sit with what's there, like a big lump, it may go away after a while, but you don't really learn anything, aside from a little patience. But you may also learn that you develop a dislike for the meditation. How can you sit with these big lumps and these big boulders of suffering?

So start applying the Buddha's perceptions, the Buddha's medicine, to that boulder, to see where you can start taking it apart. See the way in which it already is not a boulder, that it's really something else if you look at it in a different way. This way, you learn the power of perception and you get practice in how to practice medicine for the mind, because it's only through hands-on experience in learning how to direct the mind in new ways like this that you can finally get the mind to the place where it doesn't need any more medicine.

At that point, the Buddha says, you're beyond training. You don't really need his Dhamma

anymore. But as long as the mind still has its suffering, still has its greed, anger, and delusions, it still needs medicine. He provides the medicine with some instructions on how to use it, but it's up to us to figure out when it's beneficial and when it's timely and how to apply it to the specific diseases we're suffering from right now.