

Accepting the Way Out

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Apparently there's a new book out on the American positive thinking industry. It was reviewed recently by someone who came to the States from another country and said that this is one of the things she'd found strange about our country, the emphasis everybody put on how you have to think positively, you have to have an optimistic outlook. If you're unhappy, it's your fault, because you're not thinking positively enough.

Both the book and the reviewer are pointing out how really inhumane this attitude is: placing the blame for people's suffering on them. In fact, the author of the book was talking about how this is probably a top-down phenomenon. The people in charge want to tell everybody beneath them that "The reason you're miserable is not because we're taking advantage of you or because we're ripping you off, but because you aren't thinking positively enough." And there may be some truth to that.

So where does the Dhamma come in all of this? There's nothing in the Dhamma to force you to think positively. It doesn't say you shouldn't suffer, or that if you are suffering it's all your own fault. But it does say that you have the choice as to whether you're going to suffer from outside circumstances. The Buddha doesn't say you have to accept the way things are outside, or that you're not allowed to change things, but he is offering you the choice: If you don't want to suffer, here are some tools. If you want to make change outside, it's a lot better if you're not making yourself suffer from the situation you find yourself in. That way, you can look at it more objectively and figure out what really does need to be changed, and where the most effective change would come.

A couple months back I was talking to a group of people about equanimity. Someone was saying that teaching people equanimity is pretty hardhearted. Suppose someone lost a child through murder or suffered some other injustice: You're telling them they have to be equanimous? And no, the answer is they don't *have* to be equanimous. But the Buddha is saying you don't have to spend your life in misery over those events. The choice is yours.

That's what his teachings on suffering are all about. He offers them as an opportunity. He's not the type of thinker who says you have to do this, you have to do that. It's remarkable how little he pushes himself on people. In the Vinaya, he does lay down the law for the monks and nuns. Because they've given themselves to the practice, he demands a higher level of commitment from them.

But he never tells anybody they *have* to do anything in any way. He says, if you want to find true happiness, this is how it's done. If you want to learn how not to suffer, this is how it's done. The choice is yours.

So when you find yourself suffering from something, even if it's just a bad mood, remember the Buddha's not saying you have to get out of the bad mood, or that you're a bad person for being in the bad mood. He simply wants to remind, you: You have the choice. You can stay in that bad mood or you can get out.

And the main point of his perspective here is that it's not just that you're suffering from the mood, but you're also creating it. You have a role in putting that mood together. Just learning how to remind yourself of that role—that you can step back and look at what you're doing—that right there is half the battle. After all, our sense of self does have two roles. On the one hand, it's the experiencer. You're the one who's experiencing the pain, experiencing the results of your own actions, the results of other people's actions. But you're also the agent. You're shaping your experience.

So when you find yourself in a bad mood, it's not against the principle of acceptance to try to work your way out of it. After all, what are you accepting? Are you simply accepting the fact that you're a passive victim of things? The Buddha never asks you to accept that. He just wants you to accept the fact that you have a role in shaping your experience. That's the essential element in his teaching on conditionality. There are some influences that come in from the past, but there are other things that you have the choice to shape in the present moment. As for what's happened in the past, you can't change that. And the effects that you're feeling from things that happened in the past, you can't change that. But you do have the choice of what you're going to do right now, how you're going to look at the situation.

Your mood is a product of fabrication. And there are three kinds. There's physical fabrication, which is the breath coming in and out. It's something you have some control over. You can change the way you breathe. Nobody is forcing you to breathe in a way that's uncomfortable, that churns up the hormones in your system, that makes you feel tight and depressed, constricted, whatever. You can think about other ways of breathing, try other ways of breathing. That tackles the mood from the physical side.

And it's an important part of looking at the mood. If you try to simply think your way out of the mood, many times you find yourself stuck. You wonder, "What's up? What's going on? Why do I know all the right things to think, but nothing is happening?" It's because you haven't looked at the bodily side of the mood. You haven't taken care of that. You have to embody a new way of

fabricating your mood if you want to get out of it. So that's the first thing you look at. This is why we practice with the breath so much, so that it becomes second nature: As soon as something comes up, you check the breath. If the breath doesn't feel good, you can change it.

Then there's verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself about the issue at hand. That's tied in with mental fabrication, your feelings and your perceptions of what's going on. And one of the big perceptions that keeps you in a bad mood is, "Why me? Why am I the victim when everybody else is happy, free from suffering?" This is because you're not looking. Look around you. There's injustice all over the place. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't fight the injustice that you're suffering from, but it does mean that you have to put it into perspective. It's not just you. So you want to take that perception out of your mind.

Think about the Buddha on the night of his awakening. He had those memories of previous lifetimes. And you can be pretty sure that they weren't all pleasant memories: memories of injustices he had suffered from, indignities he had suffered from, stupid things he had done, stupid things other people had done to him. It was all there.

But he didn't stop with that knowledge. The next question was: Does this happen just to me or does this happen to everybody, this constant coming back, coming back, coming back in so many different roles, so many different places? He found that it happened to everybody. It wasn't just him. And when you think about how it happens to everybody, you can start seeing patterns. That's what he did when he was thinking about all the beings in the world dying and being reborn: How did that happen? Well, it was in line with their actions. Their actions were shaped by who they respected, who they listened to, what kind of views they had about the principle of action.

That realization was what enabled him to move on to the third knowledge, looking in the present moment to see how his intentions were shaping the present moment, how his views were shaping his experience of the present moment, and what kind of views could be used to put an end to the suffering.

So when you find yourself in a bad mood, think in these ways. What's the perception you're holding onto? What are the narratives you're telling yourself? What's the context of your thinking? Can you change this context so that you're not suffering? Because the bad mood is a primary example of the Buddha's teachings on the first noble truth: the kind of suffering that comes from craving and clinging. Here's your chance to look at it. After all, the duty he recommends for the first noble truth is to comprehend it. That means to look at, watch it, see what you're doing to contribute to that suffering, where you're adding

unnecessary suffering to what's going on. Again, the duty here is voluntary. He's not pushing it on you. He's just recommending that if you find yourself faced by the situation, this is the best thing to do.

So even if the world is dumping on you, you don't have to dump on yourself. There's that image the Buddha has of the person being shot by an arrow, and then turning around and shooting himself with several more arrows. In other words, the first arrow is the pain of the aggregates, simply the pain of change, physical pain, whatever kind of pain that just happens to you. But then the mind turns around and just shoots another arrow. The sutta talks about one arrow. But if you look at yourself, you find yourself with a whole quiver of arrows, you just keep shooting, shooting, shooting away. If you're going to learn how to accept that fact, it doesn't mean you just say, "Well, let's just keep on shooting." It means, "Hey, a lot of this suffering is coming from what I'm doing. I don't have to do that. No one is compelling me to shoot arrows. It's just a habit I have." If you want to keep on shooting arrows, you're perfectly entitled to. But *do* you want to? If you don't, the Buddha teaches you how to stop.

One of the important points is that first step of learning how to admit that "It's not just me suffering from the mood, I'm actually fabricating the mood somehow." In other words, you step back to see exactly what you're doing. This relates very directly to one of the themes in the Buddha's teachings, which is the questions you ask yourself about what's going on. If your questions simply assume, "I've got this big lump of a bad mood here, just take that as a given," and then wondering how do you react to this mood that somehow got placed on you or that you find yourself stuck in, the questions that come from that assumption are just going to keep you more and more tied to the mood.

But if you can step back and ask yourself, "What's the karma behind the mood?" you can get yourself out of that unskillful way of thinking. We're not talking about karma from the past so much as your present karma around the mood. What is the present fabrication going on? Can you see it as a result of action? And some parts of it, you find, will be determined by past actions. We're not necessarily talking about past lifetimes here, but more the thoughts that went through your mind 10 minutes ago, or half an hour ago, or half a day ago, that got those hormones churning to begin with. Some hormones are going to stay in your bloodstream for quite a while before they get washed out. That's an example of past karma. But you've also got the present karma that reads things, breathes around them, interprets them, and tells narratives about them. All that you can change.

So the Buddha's offering tools if you want to use them. You might have legitimate reasons for being in a bad mood, but it's up to you to decide whether you want to stay with that. Do you want to hold onto that perception that this is a legitimate bad mood, or do you want to ask yourself, "Even if it's legitimate, do I want to stick with it? Do I want to stay with it? What pleasure am I getting out of being in this mood?" Because there *is* that aspect, you know. Sometimes we like to punish ourselves. We like to feel unjustly mistreated. One of our strongest senses of self is right around that: the unjust treatment we've gotten from other people. We wear our suffering as a badge of pride.

But it's a miserable pleasure. And if you want to get out of it, the Buddha offers you tools. Some of them sound pretty abstract: his teaching on this/that conditionality, the four noble truths, dependent co-arising. They can seem awfully technical and awfully far away. But they do have a compassionate purpose. And it's important that you learn how to translate the abstractions into the immediacy of what you're doing, so that you can see, "Oh yeah, there is a fabrication going on." The breath, that's fabrication right there. It doesn't come ready labeled, so that when you first breathe in as a baby, something tells you, "Okay, here's bodily fabrication, learn how to use this well." That's not how it comes. But the realization does come when we hear the Buddha's teachings and say, "This is a useful way of looking at things. I want to learn how to internalize his teachings and understand how I can make use of them, so that I don't have to suffer so much."

When you begin to see that those terms are actually referring to something very direct and very immediate, then you empower yourself. You give yourself more options and a more useful way of seeing where you are, how you got here, and how you can get out. The choice is yours.