

The Happiness & Suffering of Others

April 9, 2018

There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha's been wounded. Devadatta rolled a rock down a mountain hoping to crush the Buddha. But instead, the rock ran against an obstacle and was shattered, and one of the stone slivers penetrated the Buddha's foot. It was very painful. So he went to lie down. As he was lying there, Mara came to taunt him. He said, "Are you moping here? Feeling depressed?" The Buddha said, "No. I'm spreading goodwill to all beings."

It's an interesting strategy. Instead of focusing on his own pain, he thought of the happiness of all beings. It's a useful strategy to adopt in lots of different situations where your pain is pretty heavy and it's weighing you down. Try to get out of yourself, think about other beings.

Remember the pattern on the Buddha's night of awakening. When he got his mind into concentration, he directed it to remembering past lives, and he found that he could remember many, many, many past lives—in other words, his narratives. You think you've got lots of narratives as you sit down to meditate. He had more than many because his memory was so good. But it raised a question: Was he the only one who had all these many past lives? And was there a pattern behind all of this? Because if you just look at the string of lives, they just go one after another after another, and at the outset it doesn't seem to have that much of a pattern at all. You can do good in this lifetime and suffer in the next, and then have pleasure in a much later lifetime. So the question was, "Is there a pattern?"

To see the pattern, he had to think about all beings dying and being reborn—everybody looking for happiness but creating a lot of trouble through their own actions, sometimes finding happiness and sometimes not. And that was the pattern: Their happiness and suffering were based on their actions. If their actions were based on right view, done with skillful intentions, then they were going to benefit from those actions. But if they were based on wrong view and unskillful intentions, they were going to suffer.

It was from that much larger perspective that he was able to turn around and look back at his own suffering in the present moment: looking for the intention, looking for the view. And also asking the question, "What kind of intention and what kind of view, instead of leading to good or bad rebirths, would actually lead you out of the cycle?" And he found that there were intentions and there were views that could do that. Right view, right concentration, right resolve, all these

work together to get you out. That was how he was able to gain escape from his suffering.

Notice the pattern. You get perspective on your own suffering first by thinking about the suffering and happiness of others and thinking about how we all want happiness. This is one of the reasons why we spread thoughts of goodwill to everybody every night, every morning: to take us out of our immediate perspective and take on the larger perspective. Then we can turn around and look back at our own sufferings and have a new way of looking at them, realizing that it's not just us: Everybody's suffering, everybody wants happiness. And that takes some of the weight off of our own suffering.

It also makes it easier to live with other people. Realizing that they're bungling along as well makes them a lot less fearful. Because when you understand others, you can deal with them with a lot less fear. It's through our lack of understanding of other people that they're very scary. We have anxiety about dealing with other people who'll be judging us—all kinds of anxieties: social anxieties, anxieties at work. If we focus too much on our own anxieties, we make the situation worse. It's good to get out of ourselves for a bit and think about, well, what do *they* want? Why are they acting the way they act? The basic underlying assumption has to be that they're acting for the sake of happiness. But what's their conception of happiness? If their conception is something that you can help provide, and be following the precepts at the same time, then you have a way of dealing with them and negotiating with them—coming not out of fear but more out of understanding.

It's like dealing with snakes. When you don't understand snakes at all, they're very scary. We had someone here last week who thought that snakes went around wanting to bite people. So of course every time he saw a snake, he was scared. Every time he even thought of the snakes around here, he was scared. But you have to realize that snakes don't want to bite people. That's the last thing they want to do. They'll do it if they have to, but that's not what they're looking for. Realizing this makes it a lot easier to deal with them.

The same with other people: Think about the fact that they want happiness. They may have some screwy ideas about what happiness is going to be, but maybe there's something in there that you can help provide. That gives you leverage, so that they're not totally scary. You begin to get a sense of where they're coming from and what you can anticipate.

The past few months I've been practicing my French by reading biographies. Two people in particular were interesting: Talleyrand and Mazarin. Both of them were in very precarious situations. They had a lot of power, they were in many

cases the power behind the throne, but the throne could turn around and stomp on them any time at all, so they had to be very careful. And being in a position like that, they had lots of enemies who were out to get them.

On the one hand, they were both very bold people. They had a lot of physical courage. But they were also very, very cautious. And in both cases, they were very careful when thinking about the issue of what other people want. As they were trying to advance their own careers, they kept thinking, “What could I do to help other people? Where do we have interests in common?” This is why they were not so afraid of other people. They kept looking for “What do they want? What can I provide?”

Now in some of their cases, the help they could provide—and the help they looked for in return—wasn’t all that skillful in the Buddhist sense: It was more like, “I’ll scratch your back, you scratch mine.” But both of them were really marked by the fact that they had nerves of steel. They were thrown in difficult situations where everybody else thought, “Well, that’s the end,” and yet they were able to find some way out. Because they tried to get out of their own fears and think about the other side. The other people who were against them, what did they want? “Maybe we can find a solution.” Or as Talleyrand said, when you’re negotiating with someone else and you’re actually getting the better side of the deal, make sure that the other person doesn’t lose face. Keep the other person’s feelings in mind and it’s a lot easier to deal with him.

So when you find yourself suffering from anxiety about dealing with other people, try to get out of your anxiety by thinking: What do they want? Think a bit about *their* happiness and the fact that they’re suffering. That not only gives you a perspective on your own sufferings but it also makes it a lot easier to deal with other people, because you’re coming less from fear and more from using your powers of observation.

Spreading thoughts of goodwill is one way of doing this. Think about, “May these other people be happy,” and that realize that they’re looking for happiness just like you. We’re all coming from a place where we’re suffering. That realization helps to equalize things; it levels the playing field to some extent. Then when the time comes to turn around and look at your own sufferings, you’ve got a new perspective on them. You realize that you’re not the only one suffering. And there’s something you can learn from the lessons that other people have learned in their quest to overcome suffering as well. This is why we’re here practicing.

As someone once said, one of the most reassuring things about Buddhism is that it talks very openly about suffering. It doesn’t hide it, doesn’t push it away—like the doctor who’s willing to say, okay, the operation will have a chance for

success but there's a chance that it won't succeed, and so he talks very openly about what happens if it doesn't succeed, so that you have a way of making a decision. This is much better than the doctor who says, "Well, there's 90 percent chance of success, so there's no way that it can fail." You say, "Wait a minute. What about that other ten percent?" The people who try to hide the ten percent, those are the ones you have to watch out for. But the Buddha talks openly about suffering because he does have a cure. So we can learn from his lessons. And what did he learn from? He learned from his own experience, but he also learned from watching the experience of others, the behavior of others.

So we're not here just gazing at our navels. We're learning to be more observant all-around: watching the mind directly as we're meditating, and then watching other people as we deal with them. It helps if you have a foundation of strength inside as you're watching others, so you don't feel quite so threatened. But it's the observation that allows you to understand where other people are coming from—so that you're not dealing with a fear of the unknown.

This is one of the reasons why, when the Buddha talks about mindfulness, there's mindfulness internally and there's mindfulness externally. In other words, you notice that you're suffering in a particular way, well, you realize that other people are suffering in that way, too. That realization helps to equalize things, makes the suffering a little bit easier to bear. It's not as if the universe has picked you out for special torment. And you realize that the torment doesn't come from the universe anyhow, it comes from your own actions. You see other people making themselves miserable, so you turn around and realize, "I'm doing the same sort of thing." This not only equalizes things but also gives you some clues about the way out.

So sometimes it is useful to reflect on the happiness and suffering of others, so that your dealings with them are a lot easier and your dealings with your own happiness and suffering get more effective.