How Not to Suffer

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The Buddha realized that the being-issue in life is the suffering in the mind. And that the most important teaching would be a teaching that brings an end to that suffering. And his great discovery was that the suffering we have in the mind is something we should cause ourselves. There is pain, of course, that comes from outside. Disappointments in life, pains in the body itself, illnesses, aging, illness and death in the body. But he realized that the reason the mind suffers because of these things is through its own actions. It’s the way it processes the things that come in by way of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body. Memories of the past, anticipations of the future. It’s how we deal with these things that makes us suffer. And this is why his teaching is a how-to teaching. It teaches us how not to create that unnecessary suffering. And it’s a how-to teaching that depends a lot on qualities of the mind. Towards the end of this life, he called his monks together at one point and gave them a list of what he said were his most important teachings, the ones that would keep the teaching alive, keep his message alive. And almost all of them were qualities of mind. Conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment, rapture, equanimity. Serenity. These are qualities that help the mind to see more clearly what it’s doing. Once you have those qualities developed in the mind, you can’t help but notice when you’re creating unnecessary suffering for yourself. So that’s what we’re working on as we meditate. It’s not that we follow step one, two, three, four, and everything’s going to turn out okay simply by following the steps. We follow the steps because it gives us an opportunity to develop the right qualities in our mind, the qualities that allow us to notice what’s happening. Because when you’re practicing a musical instrument, if you simply go through the motions of practicing for an hour or however long without noticing what you’re doing, you don’t really benefit that much from the practice. It’s the practice where you’re noticing what’s happening and noticing where you’re doing things in an inefficient way, doing things in an awkward way. And you figure out new ways of doing it. That’s the kind of practice that benefits you. And again, it may require long hours, but the difference is in the quality of mind you bring to it, the quality of attention you bring to it. Buddha listed qualities of mind as his most important teachings. He was confident that once you have these qualities of mind and you apply them to this issue of where there is unnecessary suffering in the mind, you’ll see and understand and learn all the skills that you’ll need to know. It’s like someone who teaches a musical instrument. You could spend a lot of time talking about the theory of sound and the theory of how the instrument is designed, and the principles of physics and the principles of chemistry that underlie it. But that won’t guarantee that you’ll learn how to play it properly. What does guarantee it is that you’re given exercises and you’re encouraged to be observant. That gives you your best opportunity to play the instrument well. This is why there are so many questions that the Buddha didn’t address. When people asked him, “Well, what is it that gets reborn?” he said, “Don’t ask.” He said, “It’s an inappropriate question.” He said, “There is rebirth.” But you can say, “Is there something that gains rebirth? Or is there nothing that gains rebirth?” He said, “That’s not the issue. The issue is learning how to master the process. That’s how it’s happening right here, right now.” As the mind moves from one thought to another, or one mental world to another, it’s the same process that happens at the end of life. So if you learn how to master the process here, you’ve covered the issues at the end of life as well. And how do you master those processes? By paying careful attention to what you’re doing. So instead of filling your mind with abstract questions, he encourages you to keep focusing back. What are you doing right now? In the meditation, we’re given something very simple to do. Stay with the breath. The mind wanders off. Bring it back to the breath. Learn efficient and skillful ways of doing that. So it’s not a constant push and pull in the mind, but learning how to create a sense of space in the present moment where you like to stay, where the mind feels comfortable, where the mind feels at ease. If you’re observant, you’ll notice that there are two issues here. One is the issue of how you breathe. The other is the issue of how you focus the mind. So you learn how to play with both of those. Try longer breathing. Try shorter breathing. Try deeper breathing. Think of the breath energy coming in and out of the body in unusual places, in, say, from the back of the head. Or into the forehead, into the middle of the chest. Flowing down the backbone, the tip of the backbone, and then down through the legs. Think of the body breathing through every pore. You experiment this way and you begin to notice that simply your conception of the breath will change the way the breath is experienced. And you can test to see which way of conceiving the breath works best right now. It’s not that there will be one method that always works. There’s always the best one. But you want to have a whole range in your repertoire. Different ways of conceiving the breath. The ways that help when you have a headache, say. The ways that help when you have a stomachache. The ways that help when you’re tired. The ways that help when you’re tense. It’s good to have that repertoire to work with. And you’ve learned an important lesson. The fact that you weren’t paying attention meant that you were limiting your repertoire, causing unnecessary suffering for yourself. That in and of itself should make you curious. See what other things are going on in the mind, what other possibilities, what other range of possibilities there might be that you hadn’t even conceived of before. When you’re focused on the breath, exactly how do you focus on the breath? What is the process? Do you have the feeling that you’re up in the head looking at the body from that separate vantage point? Or are you in the body? One teacher once said, “It’s not a question of being aware of the body. It’s the body’s own awareness.” There is already a sense of awareness in the body. Try to get in touch with that aspect of your awareness. So that as you breathe in, you’re bathed in the breath. You’re surrounded by the breath. It’s not that you’re off in one corner watching it as something separate. You want to be right in the middle of it. See what that does to your experience of the breath, to your ability to stay in the present moment. Sometimes you notice there’s a feeling of the body being in the head, or sometimes it’s just body with no head at all. It’s strange the way you perceive your body and the way you focus your attention on the body in the present moment. There are lots of possibilities. And as you meditate, you’re free to play with them, to develop those qualities of alertness and mindfulness and investigation that help you realize that there’s a lot more going on in the present moment than you might have imagined, and you’re creating stress, you’re creating discomfort for yourself in many ways that you might not even have thought of. These are some of the benefits that come from approaching the whole issue of the suffering of the mind, not so much as a theory but as a skill, something you work on, new talents that you develop in how to handle the raw material of your life. Then as your interest gets piqued by this question or piqued by this challenge, as you pursue it, you find that you really do benefit from it much better than would have happened if you sat around arguing about various theories about how the mind is related to the body. Are they separate? Are they the same? All those issues that are basically a waste of time, because after all, we are suffering from moment to moment. Sometimes it’s very subtle. Sometimes it’s more blatant. But the potential for suffering is always there. The potential for unskillful action is always there. So we have to be careful. We can’t waste our time. There’s a famous story about the man who’d been shot by an arrow. He’s taken to a surgeon. The surgeon’s getting ready to remove the arrow. The man says, “Wait a minute, before you remove the arrow, I want to know who shot the arrow, what kind of wood the arrow was made of, what kind of feathers it was made of. As for the person who shot it, I’d like to know his caste. I’d like to know his family background.” As the Buddha said, the man will die before the arrow gets out if he sticks with those demands. The Buddha compared himself to a surgeon. We all have arrows in our hearts, and he’s got the skill for teaching us how to remove them. He’s got a program to teach us the skill for how to remove them. So focus on this issue, because this is the issue that gives results. This is the issue that really can make a change in your life, in the way you live in your mind, the way you handle the issues that arise in the mind. So that you can live in this world, you can live in this realm of experience you have, without causing unnecessary suffering. And when there’s no unnecessary suffering, there is no suffering in the mind. There may be pains in the body. After all, the body already has been born. It’s going to have to go through aging, illness, and death. But the mind doesn’t have to suffer from those things if it learns the proper skill. That’s what we’re working on right now.

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