Switching Tracks

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All too often our experience of life seems to go around and around in circles. The Buddha points out, for instance, that when we suffer, one of our natural reactions is bewilderment as to why we’re suffering. Well, bewilderment is awfully close to ignorance, and ignorance can lead to more suffering. But the cycle of dependent arising is often depicted as a wheel. If it really were a wheel, there’d be no way out. Once the wheel was set in motion, everything would just have to follow around and around and around. There’d be no way of getting off the cycle of suffering. Fortunately, life is not like a wheel. It’s actually more like one of those train sets that has lots of different cycles, lots of different loops. The train can go around one larger circle or smaller circles, or different paths altogether, because there are switches here and there where you can switch from one set of tracks to another. So if there’s a bad patch on one of the tracks, using the switch intelligently, you can go off to a set of tracks that’s not so bad. You can avoid the suffering. You can avoid the problems. That’s what the Buddha’s insight was, that we don’t have to go around and around in circles all the time. There are spots in our awareness where we can switch things, make a difference. Two important switches in our mind are intention, the fact that we can make choices, and attention, which in the Buddhist texts means the ability to ask the right questions, focus on the right things. The questions we ask ourselves, the choices we make, these are switches in our experience. The purpose of meditation is to make us more aware of where these switches are and how the switch is skillfully or unskillfully managed. These things happen very quickly. The levels of intentions in our mind can sometimes be very quick. Oftentimes, when we’re consciously making decisions, the decision has already been made on a more subliminal level, a lot faster. It was simply because our mindfulness wasn’t quick enough to catch it that we didn’t see it. But the situation has already been set up. The question has been framed in a certain way, and the choices seem pretty obvious when we get there, because the groundwork has already been laid. The mind is very much like the face. Psychologists have discovered that people have immediate involuntary expressions that run over their faces, sometimes very, very quickly, before they completely compose an expression that they feel is more socially acceptable, or the type of expression they want to convey to other people. Some people are very sensitive, and they can catch those fleeting expressions. Other people miss them entirely, because their powers of observation are not quick enough. This is why the Buddha often stressed so much these two factors of intention and intentionality. They happen so quickly in the mind, and if we don’t catch them quickly enough to make sure that they’re done skillfully, we keep going around that cycle that leads to suffering and then bewilderment, and then to ignorance, and then back to suffering again, and around and around and around. In other words, the Buddha wants us to see what our intentions are when they’re being made, and to realize that they have consequences, and to realize that we do have choices. We don’t have to keep going around in the same old habit patterns over and over again. We can try something new. Try the switch. When we’re mastering the switch, it’s to learn how to ask the proper questions. He gives a very clear set of instructions, anything that has to do with questions about suffering and the cause of suffering, and what to do to get out of it. Those are skillful questions. Bhakti once stated that he only taught two things, suffering and the end of suffering, which covers all four noble truths. Other issues he put aside. We all know that passage where the Buddha is out in the forest and picks up a handful of leaves. He compares the leaves in his hand to the teachings he’s given. As for the leaves in the forest, he said that’s like the things he came to understand through his awakening, but it’s only the useful part of the awakening that he offered. That’s why he’s very specific about the questions he would and wouldn’t answer. Questions about the existence of a self, the non-existence of a self, what gets reborn, what doesn’t get reborn. He says that deflects you from focusing on the issue at hand, which is the choices you’re making and the questions you’re asking, and how those switch you from one loop to another loop in the mind. He also talked about loops that pull you away from the practice in such a way as to learn how to get you back. This afternoon we were talking about psychic powers. Those can be one of the major distractions in the path if people happen to develop them in their practice. So the Buddha deals with them specifically, clearly, in such a way that you can bring those talents, bring that type of knowledge, back onto the path of learning to see your perceptions, learning to see your intentions, learning to see the questions you ask, and being very clear about the repercussions of those factors. Otherwise, if you’re asking the wrong questions, looking at the wrong things, you go right to the place where there was an opportunity to switch off of the track of suffering, but you didn’t switch. You were watching the scenery off to the left or off to the right instead of paying attention to the track. So we’re practicing mindfulness. We’re practicing alertness right here as we try to keep our minds on the track so we get quicker and quicker to see how the mind can get distracted and learn how to prevent that. The Thais have a word that they use for frequency of things that happen over and over again. The word is “ti.” If something is very frequent or repeated very fast, then it’s “ti.” That’s the word they use to describe it. This is what we’re doing. We’re trying to get our mindfulness to keep being very fast, catching things as they happen, and then realizing that something else is going to happen right afterwards, so you can’t hold on to anything too much. Just hold on to the breath here. As for anything else that comes up, just try to keep coming back to the breath, coming back to the breath, because those distractions can happen very fast. Many times they’re subliminal and a much faster sort of rate of revolution, you might say. They spin around faster. So our mindfulness has to be quick to catch up with these things. As it is, we get more and more attuned to these subliminal intentions, these subliminal decisions that are made in the back rooms. The public meeting room may be going on in perfectly fine parliamentary order, but a lot of important decisions are being made in the back room, so we have to learn how to open up those back rooms. We do it this way, by keeping our mindfulness really quick, keeping our alertness very refined. Even the subtle subliminal decisions that are made in the mind, the intentions, the way we frame things in the mind, we catch up and we see them happening. It’s when you can see them happening that you realize what’s skillful, what’s unskillful, what you really do want to follow through with, and what you don’t. It’s in this way that we learn how to break the cycle, so we don’t have to keep going through that cycle of suffering and bewilderment and ignorance around and around and around. We break it through knowledge, properly directed knowledge. There are millions of things we could know in the world. We could try and know all the leaves in the forest, but it doesn’t necessarily help us come to an end of suffering. This is why the practice is focused on specific questions, on specific issues, because these are the ones that are the switches that can take us out of the loop of suffering and into other loops, loops that go away from the suffering. So when you find yourself stuck in these loops that go around and around and around, the same old pattern, ask yourself, “What questions are you asking? What intentions are you making? What choices are you making?” Try to be mindful to watch, to see both on the conscious level and on the subliminal level. You start with making new conscious decisions, asking new conscious questions, in line with what the Buddha teaches, in line with the Dharma. Then, as you get sensitive to those switches, you get more and more sensitive to the subliminal ones, the quick ones that went in under the radar before, but now that you’re more aware, the range of awareness is broader. Resolution is sharper. You see more and more of the picture. You can catch these things that used to slip past. Remember, these are the important issues, the questions you ask, the choices you make. It’s right here that the choice between being stuck in the rut for the rest of your life and finding freedom is made. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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