Point of Suffering, The

October 6, 2004

What we just chanted was the Buddha’s second sermon. In his first sermon, he’s focused on the issue of suffering, showing not only that there was suffering, which everyone knows. He started with something that’s perfectly obvious. Then he went on to say that there’s a cause to suffering. It’s not just a random coincidence. There’s a pattern to why we suffer. He said there’s a way out. Once you understand the pattern, once you understand the causes, you can undercut the causes through your own actions and bring suffering to an end. In the course of describing suffering there, he talked about how aging illnesses and death is suffering—not getting what you want, having to live with things you don’t like, being separated from things that you do like. Then he finally summarized it by saying the five aggregates of clinging, or the five clinging aggregates, are suffering. He didn’t explain it any further, at least in the text we have. It was in the second sermon that he actually explained suffering in more detail. What he pointed out was that our deepest suffering is the fact that we cling to things. We identify ourselves with things that are actually suffering. In fact, the fact that we identify them, cling to them, is what makes them suffering. So we have to learn how not to hold on to these things. The problem is that our whole sense of who we are is made up of these things. So we’ve got to be willing to take it apart bit by bit. This is how you deal with it. Instead of dealing with your whole sense of who you are, he says, take it apart piece by piece by piece and see what you’ve got. You look at the body. Can you really lay claim to it as yours? It seems to be yours when you can move it around, but there come times when, on the one hand, it grows old without asking you for permission to grow old. It gets sick and it dies without asking permission. Those things are outside of your control. Then as you look at feelings, it’s the same thing. Feelings are not totally under your control. Perceptions, thought constructs, it’s like peeling an onion layer by layer by layer. Each thing you look at, you realize that it’s not under your control. So how can you really identify with it as yourself, or as belonging to you, in a really deep sense? The purpose of all this is to help you loosen your attachment to these things so they don’t cause you suffering. You have to do this analysis, though, from a perspective of a quiet mind. Because if you feel threatened by the analysis, it just puts you into a very negative state. You feel like your whole being is suddenly being negated. But if you work at it from a point of view of the mind, it’s still. It’s settled down. It has a sense of well-being here in the present moment. Then you can take this thing on piece by piece by piece. Then you ask yourself, “Do I really want to identify with it? Is it really appropriate?” When you see the drawbacks of identifying, then you can drop them because you have something better. Then you keep going through stage by stage by stage until finally you have to turn and let go of that something better as well. When you realize that’s the only thing left that you’re holding on to, and the fact that you’re holding on to that at that point becomes a problem. But until then, don’t let go. I was talking this evening with someone who’d been told that when you say you take the breath as the object of your meditation, when you’ve settled down with the breath, the first thing you do is focus on the inconstancy of your breath. Well, that’s undercutting yourself. You focus on the inconstancy of the breath only when you’ve got to a stage where there is no breathing, and you realize that you can still survive that. In fact, the mind just feels a lot more open, settled, solid, secure. But until you’ve reached that stage, don’t start undercutting yourself. In other words, don’t destroy your path. The path gives you something to stand on, gives you something to walk along. Don’t start digging up your path before you’re ready. The paradox here is that the path itself is made out of these same five aggregates. There’s the form of your body that you’re focusing on in concentration. There’s the feelings of ease that come with the breath. There’s the perception of breath that holds you in that state of concentration. There’s the directed thought and evaluation. There’s the thought constructs, and there’s the awareness of all this. The mind in concentration is made up of these same five aggregates. So what you’re doing is you’re learning to use them. Use a very refined set of aggregates to let go of the grosser set of aggregates. Because it’s not that the aggregates are just one thing. They’re types of things. One of the other words for translations for khandha, which we translate as aggregates, is a pile of things or a collection of things. You have different experiences of the form of the body, different feelings, different sensations, perceptions, thought constructs, acts of consciousness. So what you’re doing is you’re using a certain sense of form to overcome your attachment to grosser set of aggregates. So this is why we work so hard at concentration. This is not a path of just letting go, letting go. You have to construct. You have to put things together. So instead of creating a very unskillful sense of self out of the aggregates, you have to create a more skillful one, and then a more skillful one. Without thinking so much about what a sense of self it is, simply, it becomes your path. These are the tools you’re using. This is the path of practice you’re following. Because these aggregates are actions. We tend to think of them as things, but when you see them defined, they’re defined as actions. Form itself keeps deteriorating. It’s in a state of flux all the time. Feeling, feeling feels. Perceptions perceive. Fabrications fabricate things. In fact, fabrication underlies all the experience of the aggregates. Consciousness cognizes their actions, their activities. So instead of trying to freeze these activities and turn them into little building blocks to make a self, you realize, “Okay, this is an activity. Let’s do it as an activity. Let’s make it an activity that’s skillful, an activity that leads to the end of suffering.” You put them all together in that way, and then you really get something out of them, something really useful. So when the Buddha says to let go, remember, he’s not saying let go of everything all at once, because that just leaves you floating. When you’re floating, you tend to try to hang on to whatever comes next. He says you let go in stages. John Fung said it was like rockets going into the moon. First there’s the booster rockets, then you let go of those, and then you finally, stage by stage by stage, the different rockets let go until you finally get just the moon orbiter. It’s the same way in your practice. You let go of the grosser things and hang on to the more refined ones until you realize that that’s the only thing that’s causing you suffering, so you let those go, step by step by step. Finally, you let go of everything when you’re on the right position to do so. It’s important that you understand how these aggregates function, because they are functioning things. The whole purpose of the path is to direct their functioning in a particular direction. We were talking earlier today about how the Buddha didn’t teach a systematic philosophy, but he did have a very clear sense of priorities as to what’s a useful action and what’s not a useful action, and what kind of happiness is worth striving for, what kind of happiness is not worth striving for, and what kind of happiness is a good intermediary to the ultimate happiness you want. He’s very clear on that. Those are the issues that really matter. So remember, the aggregates on themselves are neutral. It’s when you cling to them that they cause suffering. If you cling to them in a more skillful way, they can become a path. They’re still clinging in the path as you’re rolled onto it. But this is suffering with a purpose. Most of the suffering in the world doesn’t accomplish anything. It’s just pointless suffering. If we don’t dedicate ourselves to the path, that’s just pointless suffering. But if you decide to take these aggregates and turn them into a path, then the suffering that remains on the path is suffering that has a purpose. That’s the point. It serves a purpose, because ultimately it helps you get out of all the suffering. So when you have a sensation of form in the body, feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness, ask yourself, “What’s the best use of these things?” Because they are activities. What’s the best use of this activity? Where is it best directed? Instead of latching onto, “This is me,” or “This is mine,” simply say, “Where is this going? Is this something worth following through? Is this something worth dropping?” When you see them as activities, as part of a causal chain, you get more and more familiar with where they actually lead. As we were saying earlier today, many times we jump into a thought construct, like jumping into a car. Somebody comes driving up and says, “Hey, let’s go.” You don’t ask who they are or where they’re going. You just jump in and go. They might drive you off to the edge of the city, shoot you, and leave your body in a ditch. That’s what your thoughts do to you sometimes. Then you come back to life and then somebody else picks you up. Some people take you to nice places and other people take you to bad places. You have to look at where these thoughts are going to take you and decide whether you want to go with them. You have to say, “Well, this is my way of thinking. This is the way I tend to see things.” Well, again, you’re turning it into suffering, pointless suffering. But you have a better idea of these things as part of a causal chain. Where do they go? And you can point them at a useful place. Useful direction. Finally, they deliver you to where you want to go, and then you can totally let them go. That’s when you’ve got the best use out of them.

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