Handful of Leaves, A

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They say that after his awakening. When the Buddha first surveyed the world with the eye of an awakened one, he saw everyone running around on fire, with the fires of passion, aversion, delusion. On fire in the sense that they were doing all kinds of unskillful things. He saw them reaping pain and suffering, and then doing more unskillful things to get away from the pain and suffering, just piling more and more on top of themselves. The purpose of his teaching was to get them to stop doing those unskillful things. It’s important to keep that point in mind. When you look at any of the Buddha’s teachings, the question is, what is he trying to get you to stop doing? He wasn’t setting out a philosophy to show how much he knew or how much of reality he could put into a structure of his thought. Instead, he was teaching techniques, teaching approaches. So he could stop doing unskillful things. Whatever he explained about reality or experience was solely for this purpose. It wasn’t his purpose to set out a systematic philosophy. It was more to set out useful truths, truths that would help bring us to our senses. The reason we’re doing all these unskillful things is because we’re deluded. We’re not paying attention. His teaching was that if you’re paying attention to what you’re doing, you start to see how unskillful most of your actions are, and you begin to see which ones are more or less skillful, and you begin sorting things out. So that’s what all of his teachings are all about. Directions for being more skillful. The notion of activity here goes very deep. Even your experience of reality is something you construct out of raw materials. As the Buddha pointed out, the constructs that we carry around in our heads seem to be a lot more solid than the materials are actually made out of. A lot of the constructions in our heads are the things that are causing us to do unskillful things. One of the important approaches of his teaching is to learn how to take those things apart. In other words, you build up your sense of the Self, you build up your sense of the world, what’s important in the world, what’s important in yourself. There’s a whole construct that you’ve created to decide what’s important, what’s not, what you want to do, what you don’t want to do. And because it’s based on delusion, that construct heads you off in the wrong direction. So he teaches you how to take it apart by focusing on the issue of what exactly you’re experiencing right in the present moment. What are the raw materials out of which those things are made? And all of his teachings and teachings as to what you do as part of the course of practice are designed to make you question things, even something as simple as the practice of generosity. Deep down inside, there’s a thought, “I want as much as I can gather up. I want as much as I can hold to myself.” Yet the Buddha asks you to question that. Does that really lead to happiness? He says, “Try being generous and see what happens.” And as you make a habit of this, you begin to see that your very solid sense of yourself is having to shore up all kinds of things and put walls around them. It begins to look more and more shabby all the time. So you realize it’s not real. There’s a happiness that comes from being generous, that comes from letting go. The same with the precepts. You try to make a habit of these practices, holding by these principles, and you find that if you really hold by them, you’re going to run up against a lot of ideas about yourself. You begin to see how shabby those ideas about yourself were. You begin to let go. You begin to loosen up. And the same when you meditate. Sitting here trying to get the mind still, all kinds of other things are going to come in, things that you like to think about. The Buddha says those are hindrances. If you really want the mind to settle down and have a sense of real ease, bliss, rapture, you’ve got to learn how to let go of those things. You find that there are common patterns in the mind—sensual desire, ill will, torpor and lethargy, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty and doubt. These are a lot of the common patterns in the mind. We don’t see them as hindrances normally, especially sensual desire. We think that’s pretty cool. A lot of our life is aimed at following our sensual desires. If anybody gets in the way, then we start feeling ill will towards them. If we’re stuck in a place where we can’t get what we want, we start getting torpored and lethargic. We get bored, or we get restless and anxious, or we get uncertain about what will lead us to true happiness when we’re thwarted like that. These are the normal pathways in the mind. Look at most people’s minds, how they run in the course of a day. They’re pretty much confined to these five types of thoughts. As we sit down to meditate to get the mind concentrated, you’re going to run into them because they’re old habits. So we should learn how to take them apart. First, learn how to think in other ways. This is why the Buddha has us contemplate the thirty-two parts of the body that deal with lust. We should reflect on our own desire for happiness. In fact, other people desire happiness, too. And the realization that wishing for bad fortune for other people is not going to make you happy, ultimately. So why bother? As part of the mind actually chooses to go there, we think that it can’t be helped. The body gets tired, the mind gets tired, and you start getting torpid. Well, there was a choice made in there someplace. The few signs of sleepiness come along and say, “Ah, it’s time to rest. It’s time to sleep.” You’re looking for them. You’re looking for an excuse to rest. So you have to learn to think in ways that go against that tendency. It’s through striving, it’s through effort, that suffering is going to be overcome. It’s not through finding your pillow or finding an excuse to drift off. You’ve slept for how many lifetimes now? Where has it gotten you? Has it really gotten you anywhere special? It’s the same with restlessness and anxiety. Learn how to think in ways that take it apart. If you’re anxious about something, if you’re worried about something, ask yourself, “Is this worrying actually going to do something to help the situation? If it’s not, why bother?” Or with uncertainty, how many great people in the world have let themselves get caught in uncertainty and doubt? There’s the doubt that wants to know, but that’s one thing. But the uncertainty, the unwillingness to take a step, to try something out, that doesn’t lead anywhere at all. So the first step in dealing with the hindrances is just to learn how to think in opposite ways. One, recognizing them as hindrances, and two, reminding yourself why you don’t want to give in to them. Then the next step is to look at them as events. In other words, so many of these thoughts that come through our mind seem to have a lot of solidity because they fit in with a larger structure, larger patterns of thinking. But if you take them simply as events and in and of themselves, you begin to realize there’s not that much there. Sometimes it seems so strong and compelling. Learn to sit with it for a while and see how far it goes. It doesn’t go all that far. The same with all the other ones. Just look at them as an event in the mind. When uncertainty comes along, it’s so easy to identify with the uncertainty. But the first step is to learn to not identify with it. Realize that this is something that comes and it can go. You’ve already talked to yourself about what happens if you follow through with the uncertainty, so now you just look at it as an event. Start taking it apart. You find that as you give too much reality to these things, they take on strength. When you begin to look at them simply for what they are as events in the mind, without giving them any more reality than that, they seem a lot less compelling. At the same time, you try to develop the opposing qualities in the mind. John Lee has a Dhamma talk in which he pairs off the five hindrances with the five factors of jhana. For example, with uncertainty, he pairs that off with singleness of mind, singleness of occupation. If you really stick with one thing for a while, it just blocks out the whole issue of uncertainty. As a jhana foam used to say, “If you can’t be certain of anything else, at least you can be certain that the breath is coming in, the breath is going out.” So stick with what you know and show some truth. Most people are uncertain because they’re not really true to their meditation, not nearly true to themselves. You know that practice, and that practice comes from giving yourself to a path and not from hesitating and dithering around. So be true to that knowledge and pair it off. Sensual desire with directed thought. In other words, you find yourself wandering off, thinking about this, that, and the other thing. Just direct your thought back to the breath. You pair off ill will with a sense of pleasure and ease. It comes when the breath is comfortable. Torpor and lethargy was paired off with evaluation. In other words, as the mind is active, looking at things, trying to figure things out, you find that you develop an interest in what you’re doing. That helps to fight off torpor. Restlessness and anxiety, you pair that with rapture. In other words, when there’s this feeling of fullness in the mind, who wants to bother with the nibbling thoughts of restlessness and anxiety? Who would be interested? Because you’ve got something that feels really full, really refreshing. What’s there to be restless and anxious about? So when you’re dealing with the hindrances, there are many steps you can take, many types of approaches. One is to just recognize them as hindrances, realizing where they would take you. You can sit here and indulge in the hindrances for an entire hour, but what would happen as a result? Nothing much. Nothing much of any good. So you learn how to focus on their drawbacks. Then you look at them simply as events. Don’t give them any meaning. Don’t give them any more reality than they actually have. You see that they’re built out of these tiny little thought moments, none of which is all that compelling when taken on its own. To keep it on that level, they seem less and less attractive. Then you provide yourself with someplace else to go. In other words, as you focus on the breath, work to make it comfortable. Stick with it. Then you find that there’s a shift in the mind. The factors of jhana develop and they push the hindrances further and further away. Finally, as the mind settles down in concentration, you can use the same approach for any of the other assumptions we have. They keep nibbling away at the mind. They keep stirring up the mind, disturbing the mind. Your sense of the world out there, your sense of yourself in here, can start taking them apart as well. In the same way, look at the drawbacks of thinking in those ways and then see exactly what are those constructs made out of. Then you begin to see how artificial they are, how much unnecessary reality you’ve given to them. You notice a sense of deep peace that comes as you can let go of them, to stop all that constructing. Again, this is what the Buddhist teachings on not-self are all about. He’s not trying to describe some sort of metaphysical idea, but he’s just saying, “Look, you’re making a sense of self. You’re making a sense of what he calls ‘I-making’ and ‘my-making,’ and it’s making you suffer. So learn how to stop it.” It gives you ways of thinking, it gives you ways of practicing that help you to stop that activity. When the activity is stopped, that’s the end of the problem. That’s when you can let go of those teachings. As for what’s left, when you let go, what the nature of ultimate happiness is like, you don’t need a teaching for that one, because you’re there. It’s not something you’ve been doing. It’s just there. And so there’s no need for him to discuss it with you. In fact, he says you can’t describe it. He gives hints, he gives analogies, so that you have a sense of how really worthwhile it is to head in that direction. But once you’re there, who needs to be told about it? The teachings are taking you where you want to go, so that’s as far as they go. There are only later people who tried to create a systematic philosophy out of the Buddhist teachings. They missed the whole point. The teachings are meant to be used as a training, steps in teaching you how to be more and more skillful. So ultimately, you learn how to stop creating suffering for yourself and for other people. And as for what the Buddha knew beyond that, those were the leaves in the forest. When you reach the end of the handful of leaves, you’ll have your own leaves in your forest as well. It may not be as extensive as the leaves in the Buddhist forest, but it’s not limited. It’s not just that handful. But you make use of the handful. Maybe one of the reasons why the Buddha talked about leaves is that leaves are often used as medicines. You take the medicine, the disease is cured, and that’s all you need.

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