Stop Weaving

August 25, 2005

That dog is suffering, and so it wants to spread its suffering around. That’s the usual response of human beings, animals. Simply the fact of having a body, having feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness, clinging to these things, we suffer. Carrying these things around as a burden, we suffer. And it’s because we weigh ourselves down that we feel overburdened. And when you’re overburdened, the least little thing can set you off. And you end up spreading that suffering around. So one of the things we want to learn to do as meditators is not to spread it around. If it’s suffering here, we want it to stop right here. Any bad karma that comes your way, let it stop right there. There’s a Thai expression to continue what you’re doing. It’s like weaving something. In other words, you’ve got a basket that’s half-finished, and you just continue weaving it. Make it a bigger basket. The problem is, a lot of the time, it’s a bad basket to begin with. It makes you feel compelled to keep on weaving it. This is why equidimity is such an important skill to develop. Good things come, bad things come. Learn to keep the mind on an even keel so you can see how they come and then see how they go. Watching their comings and their goings, you begin to realize you don’t have to burden yourself down with them. You don’t have to keep on weaving them. There’s a teaching in the commentaries about what they call the three cycles. The cycle of action, the cycle of results, and the cycle of defilement. There are actually three steps in a cycle. First, there’s the action, which can be skillful or unskillful. And then there’s the result. That depends on the skillfulness of the action. If the action was unskillful, you develop dislike for the result. If the action was skillful, many times you get attached to the result. You want it to keep on going. Either way, you give rise to defilement in the mind. That’s the third cycle. Then, under the power of that defilement, you act again. The cycle just keeps going around. Now, you can’t cut the cycle between the action and the result. That’s the part that’s totally out of your hands. You can, however, cut it between the result and the defilement, or the defilement and the action. In other words, greed, anger, and delusion rise in your mind as a result of either experience of pleasure or experience of pain, and you can decide to not act on them. That takes restraint. Many times, with restraint, we feel a kind of pressure. You feel you’ve got to act on this, and the restraint is pushing against your impulse to act. Which is why cutting the cycle between the result of the action and the defilement is a lot more skillful. But if you’ve got to the point where there is a defilement in the mind, you don’t have to let it out. This is one of the reasons we work with the breath. As you get more and more acquainted with the breath, you begin to realize how certain ways of breathing actually aggravate the problem. Other ways of breathing can help dissipate, disperse the problem. If you’re sitting here and the breath feels really good coming in, really good going out, all kinds of other things can happen in the world and you don’t feel affected. You feel that you’ve got a sense of well-being that comes from within that’s not touched by those things. As Ajahn Lee says, “I can come in and curse your mother, and it doesn’t really affect you.” It’s like being well-fed. If you’re hungry and tired and people say even the slightest thing that’s critical, you lash out. But if you’re feeling well-fed and in a good mood, you can take the criticism and actually laugh at it and actually agree with it, “Yep, that’s right,” and maybe do something about it. This is why it’s good to have the breath as an ally. When feelings of greed or anger come welling up from the mind, instead of feeling that restraint bottles them in, you can think of whatever pressure there you feel in the body as a result of that emotion. Just let it dissipate out your hands, out your feet. There is an extent to which this path we’re following depends on your ability to keep your hands and feet relaxed in all situations. What that means is you’re able to keep mindful, keep alert, and have a sense of the whole body. Keep the breath in the whole body really still, full, pleasant, refreshing, no matter what’s happening, so that the restraint doesn’t feel like you’re being imprisoned. You dissipate the pressure and you realize that you really wouldn’t want to follow it on without action when you have a chance to look at it from a more calm point of view. But still you’ve got that issue that pleasure and pain can still give rise to defilement. That’s what you want to look into. This may be one of the meanings of that old question about the sound of one hand. The pleasure and the pain can come, but you don’t have another hand of liking or disliking to clap. The pleasure comes, the pain comes, and that’s it. It goes away. And that involves more insight, the ability to see sensory and contact sensory impingement simply as that, without you feeling that you’re being impinged on or you’re being attacked by it. You see it simply as something that comes and goes. And because it comes and goes, it’s really nothing but stress. And when it’s nothing but stress, you don’t have to put a “me” or a “mine” on it. You don’t have to lay claim to it. It’s just something that’s there and it comes and it goes, and that’s it. As the Buddha said, when you don’t react to these things with all your “me’s” and “mine’s” and all your biases, it’s just that, stress arising, stress passing away. And when you can look at it as empty, in other words, it’s arising and passing away, not necessarily to you, just an event. And you don’t lay all sorts of layers of interpretation on it in terms of who you are or what that other person is. It’s just a sound. It’s just a feeling. It’s just a sight, a taste, touch, tactile sensation. That’s it. And you can let yourself see it as empty of all the other narratives and constructs that you normally put on it. Then you really undercut the basis for the defilement, and you cut the circle at a much more effective spot. Pleasure can come, pain can come. It’s just stress arising and passing away in one way or another. Even the pleasure you realize is a kind of stress. That way, whatever the suffering, whatever the problem is, it just stops right there. And you don’t spread it around, not even in your own mind, much less to other people. And because you’re not weighing yourself down, you find that you’re able to withstand a lot more. All those narratives about how you’ve been mistreated in the past, or whatever the narrative may be, just put it aside. Take it apart. See that you don’t really get anything out of it. It’s because we think we get something out of these things that we keep them going. There is a certain amount of gratitude. As the Buddha said, if you want to understand the problems of the mind, the unskillful habits of the mind, first you have to look at what kind of gratification you get out of maintaining them. Even the habits that you don’t like about yourself, there’s got to be something that you enjoy in them. Otherwise, they wouldn’t keep coming back. When you’re honest enough to see that, “Yes, there’s something I really like about this,” then you can do something about it. Because you look at what you like about it, and it’s really not worth the pain, the dangers, the drawbacks. Because you see, you get a lot more gratification, a lot more satisfaction out of following the path, developing the skillful qualities of the mind that are part of the path. Mindfulness, alertness. The sense of ease and rapture that come with concentration, these are a lot more gratifying, a lot more fulfilling. And you realize that you’ve got the choice. You can either go with the old narratives or you can stick with your new skills. So this is one of the reasons why it’s good to have the breath as your ally. It gives you a foundation. It gives you a standing point. We can see how these processes of the mind, these cycles of action and result and defilement, are really not worth getting involved in. So, continue weaving the cycles and just leave them with their frayed ends. There’s no need for closure. You just drop the process and it just disappears. There may be other frayed ends that come up, but again, you don’t have to continue weaving them. Because if you continue weaving them for yourself, it’s more suffering for yourself and you find that you’re going to spread some around other people. So we use these skills that we’re developing in meditation, the concentration and the discernment, so whatever suffering or stress comes up in our lives, it can stop right there. There’s no need to pass it on. No need to add one last word. Let it stop in mid-sentence. Let the basket stop halfway done, because it wasn’t a good basket to begin with. It’s a huge burden off your mind and the minds of the people around you.

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