In Your Power

December 28, 2005

When the Buddha tells you to look inside for the causes of your suffering, it’s not a case of blaming the victim. He’s trying to remind you of what does lie in your power to change. Because there are a lot of things outside that are causing suffering. But you can’t change them. Or you could, if you spent a lot of time, change them. But there’s no certainty of how permanent that change would be. So as we meditate, we’re not here trying to settle old scores or trying to create justice in the world. We’re trying to figure out what it is that we’re doing that we’re contributing to our own suffering. After all, we go to all the effort of thinking and acting and speaking with the purpose of causing happiness. And yet the results don’t always come out that way. In fact, most of the time they come out the other way. We end up causing suffering for ourselves. That’s the big paradox of life. Fortunately, the way we act and speak and think, depending on our intentions, is something we can change. We can learn from our mistakes. In fact, that’s what the First Noble Truth is all about. We make mistakes. Our desires are frustrated. But we can learn from those frustrated desires. If we look at them in the right way. That’s where appropriate attention comes in. It’s not simply looking at things as they are. There are a lot of truths out there that are totally irrelevant to what we’re trying to do. We’re trying to find happiness. We’re trying to figure out how we’re creating suffering. Appropriate attention means looking at things in terms of their Four Noble Truths. Where is there suffering in your experience right now? Where is there stress? Where is there a sense of being burdened? Look for that. Try to comprehend it. Figure out where the cause is. Specifically, the cause is coming from the mind. Desire is colored by ignorance, motivated by ignorance, shaped by ignorance. It’s the ignorance that is the real problem. So you want to attach attention to that. You want to attach the problem at the cause, which means you have to try to find a path that leads to wisdom, leads to knowledge, which is what the full path is all about. Letting go of qualities that get in the way of knowledge. Abandoning wrong speech, abandoning wrong action, abandoning wrong livelihood. Why is that? Because those things make you dishonest. When the mind is dishonest, the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing. The left brain doesn’t know what the right brain is doing. At least it pretends not to know. And in that pretending not to know, you set up all kinds of walls inside that make it hard to see what’s really going on. So you learn to act and speak in ways that lead to honesty. That means that you don’t have to hide things from yourself. Now we can develop more of the qualities you need for deeper insight, mindfulness, alertness, concentration, all the factors of awakening. And as you create more knowledge, you create also less and less suffering, more knowledge specifically in terms of the stress and the cause of the stress and what you can do to stop that cause. Those are the truths you want to see. That’s what it means to have appropriate attention. You can learn about the ideas about appropriate attention by reading the texts. The actual problem is in your own mind. You spend all your time looking in the suttas. You’re looking in the wrong place. The problem is not in the suttas. The problem is in your mind. You have to straighten out your mind. You use the teachings from the suttas as tools. But you’ve got to develop the qualities that lead to knowledge within the mind so that you can see the mind in action as it’s creating suffering. Catch it in the act and you can stop it. It’s like a dog peeing on your rug. If you hit it while it’s peeing on the rug, then it’ll stop. It won’t do that anymore. So when you’re thinking or acting or speaking in ways that are causing suffering, if you catch that fact, then you’ll stop. You’ll say, “Wait a minute, this is unnecessary. This is really a burden on the mind.” You can’t blame anybody else. So when the Buddha is talking about appropriate attention, looking at the right things, looking in the right way, because there are lots of truths you could look at that are totally irrelevant to what’s the big problem in life—the fact that you’re creating suffering even though your efforts are aimed at creating happiness. So you look at things in the right way, look at things at the right place, and you bring the right qualities. Start with mindfulness. Not just any old mindfulness. Start with right mindfulness, establishing mindfulness in the right way, at the right places, right at the body, at feelings, in and of themselves. The mind in and of itself. Mental qualities in and of themselves. Ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Taking these things simply as events in and of themselves. And then watching to see what skillful and unskillful things come up around them. Skillful and unskillful mental states, that’s what it means to engage in analysis of Dhamma. Notice what you’re doing that’s giving good results, knowing what you’re doing that’s giving bad results. That’s right effort. As you apply that, give sense to a rapture, a sense of fullness, which is important. You need this rapture in your meditation, otherwise it gets dry. Wherever you sense any refreshment, allow that refreshment to spread throughout. The body. Drink it in. That’s another meaning of the word bhitti. It’s what you drink in as you meditate. This allows the mind to settle down with a sense of peace, concentration, and equanimity. Those are the factors for awakening. That’s what you’ve got to develop. So there’s work to be done. These things happen. It’s not just that they’re going to happen on their own. They happen through trial and error. You figure out what works and what doesn’t work, specifically in this issue. We keep asking that question. Where is the stress? What’s causing it? What can I do to stop it? This is what appropriate attention is all about. It’s not trying to figure out who’s responsible for all the rights and wrongs in the world. It’s simply asking, “Why are you suffering right now, and why the hell are you adding to your suffering?” You have to have that kind of attitude. You can’t be equanimous about the fact that you’re causing suffering. That’s something you’ve got to stop. As soon as you recognize that you’re causing it, why continue? After all, it takes effort to act and speak and think. So why are you putting the effort into making suffering? These are the questions you ask. These are the ways you frame the issue. This is where you look. The Buddha said that he taught just stress and suffering, and the end of stress and suffering. That’s it. We keep trying to drag in other things as well and make the issue a lot more complicated than it has to be. When you look straight at the issue, look straight at the problem. Clear away all the unnecessary clutter. Then you can actually deal with the problem properly. So that no matter what anyone else is doing to inflict pain on you, either physically or mentally, you can realize that’s their business. That’s not your concern. Your concern is what you’re doing to add to the pain. Add to the suffering. That you can stop. That much is in your power. As it turns out, what’s really in your power is all that really matters. Once you stop creating the suffering, there is no suffering in the mind. And that’s the end of all problems. That’s why this kind of attention is called appropriate attention, because it tackles the problem right at the genuine cause and it solves the problem. Ultimately, that’s all you really need to know. Just make sure that you know in the right way at the right place. And that kind of knowledge will take care of everything.

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