Taking Apart Suffering

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You think of suffering as a mountain that we carry around. And the Buddha’s teachings are a means of taking that mountain and grinding it down into gravel so you can carry it off, be done with it. The mind has this tendency of putting things together. That’s what sankara is all about. You take different elements and you put them together. And when they’re put together, they get pretty big. They seem overwhelming. But as with any large job, it can be done by breaking it down into little units. This is what the teachings on the aggregates are all about, the teachings on the establishing of mindfulness. The Buddha wants you to take things apart to see that this big mass of suffering that you’ve got here is actually composed of little tiny things, little tiny actions, little tiny decisions in the mind. Little tiny physical sensations that we’ve amassed together. We’re so good at putting things together that it takes a major shift to take things apart. You find this even as you just get started in the practice of concentration. Many times we think that you get the mind concentrated and then you work on discernment. But it doesn’t work that way. In order to get the mind to settle down, you have to understand what the obstacles are and learn how to take them apart. Sometimes the obstacles are pain in the body. But you use the breath to whatever extent you can to work through that pain, focusing on whatever parts of the body you can make comfortable, through the rhythm of the breathing and the breathing. Whether the breath is fast or slow, heavy or light, deep or shallow, you learn to adjust it. So you can help alleviate whatever pain there is in that part. So that one part that you’re focused on gets really comfortable. Then you can think of that comfort just spreading, seeping through the body. Sometimes you find that you can fill the whole body. Other times, as Ajaan Lee points out, there are certain parts that you can make comfortable and other parts that you can’t. He says, “Well, focus on the ones that you can make comfortable and stay there.” So even just dealing with the body, you’ve got to learn how to take it apart. Which sensations are breath sensations? Which ones have the potential for ease? Which ones have the potential for pain? You’ve got to learn how to analyze things if you want the mind to settle down with any skill. Some people find it easier. They just clamp down on the mind and make it still. That may work sometimes, but as far as being a skill or mastering a skill, you find that even if you have that ability to clamp things down or to get things to just go right down on their own, there will come times when you can’t. Which is why you have to learn how to analyze the problem, take it apart. Which kind of breathing are you focusing on? Are you neglecting the length of the breath? Are you neglecting which spot is most comfortable in the body? There’s a certain amount of analysis that needs to be done just to get the mind to settle down. Sometimes it’s not just an issue in the body. There are issues in the mind. Again, this ability to take things apart is important. When you have a certain mood in the mind, say there’s impatience or there’s irritation, learn how to take it apart. A good way to approach it is to assume that the mind is like a committee. There’s not just one person in there talking or just one mood in there. There are lots of different potential moods, lots of different observers. Even though the mind may tend to go in a certain direction, tend to identify with a particular mood, it doesn’t have to. That doesn’t mean there’s just the potential for the one mood there in the mind. Even though there may be impatience, there’s a part of the mind that doesn’t have to be involved in that particular story, that particular identity. Remember that the Buddha talks about this activity of creating a sense of self, ahamkara, amamangara, “I-making” and “my-making.” We tend to cobble these things together in the same way that we cobble pain and pleasure together in the body. Try consciously to cobble together a good observer, a patient observer. In other words, you don’t have to be impatient with your impatience. You don’t have to be angry at your anger. See which voices in the mind you can cobble together to just be an observer, to watch patiently, to remind yourself of all the good lessons you’ve learned in the past about how you can’t identify with your impatience or your irritation. This way, by taking things apart, you find that they become a lot more manageable. Once you’ve cobbled together a skillful mood and one part of the mind, then you can look at the unskillful mood and see how it’s created out of these little bits and pieces. A little thought here, a little physical sensation there, and they get glommed together. That might be a good translation for sankara, glomming. We take things that are actually individual events and we perceive them as one, as part of a large pattern or larger identity. Then other things get attracted. It’s like the way they create rain. They send out these little crystals which will gather water droplets and then they become raindrops. Then they’re big enough to fall. You start out with one little tiny thing and then things get glommed on. Then they turn into a huge sense of identity in the mind that takes over everything. You have to take that apart, look and see things as individual events. When you do this, you find that you can get around any mood in the mind, even if the unskillful mood refuses to go right away. Again, you have to remember that some things take a little bit of time, but develop that sense of the patient observer. You go into a house. Some of the boards are rotten. Well, you don’t lie down on the rotten boards. You lie down on the good boards. Or when you’re eating a mango, there may be a rotten spot in the mango. You don’t eat the rotten spot. You just eat the good part. Learn to identify, both in the body and in the mind, the parts that are potential for a sense of ease, a potential for a sense of equanimity, wisdom, this patient observer. Then take apart the unskillful things. In other words, you take this ability that you have to put things together, which we’re so good at, in the sense that we do it all the time. We’re not good at it in the sense that we often do it in an unskillful way, but skill can be developed. Then, from the perspective of that more skillful sense of self, you can take apart the other moods that creep into the mind and otherwise would take over. In other words, don’t be too quick to get rid of your sense of self. Learn how to use it skillfully first. If you try to get rid of it, what happens is that it sneaks into everything else you do. You may decide, “I have no separate self. I’m just a connected self, connected with the whole world.” But then you just end up with that unskillful, big sense of self. The issues haven’t been dealt with at all. Everything goes into denial, where it makes it even harder to see what’s going on. The solution is to be very clear. Be clear about how you’re creating a sense of self and learn how to do it skillfully. Notice what the little building blocks are. Put them together in a skillful way. Then, as for the unskillful ones, you can take them apart. Any unskillful fabrication, unskillful glomming that’s going on in the mind, learn to take it apart bit by bit by bit until you see it’s just gravel. It’s not a mountain. It’s just little bits and pieces. Then you can cart it off. You don’t even have to cart it off. It just disperses. The potential will be there to go back to your unskillful ways, but as long as you are insistent on trying to create a skillful sense of self, which is the part of the mind that always wants to do the most skillful thing in any situation, learn to do that habitually. Over time, your old habits of glomming together this unskillful sense of who you are and unskillful sense of whatever mood is taken over your mind will grow weaker and weaker. As you learn to see the process of fabrication, both in learning how to do it skillfully, that gives you a certain amount of insight into fabrication, and learning how to take apart the unskillful things. This is how insight helps with concentration. You get the mind into a more stable mood. It’s more willing to settle down, regardless of what the breath is like. Sometimes you can’t get the breath really comfortable, but there are some parts in the body, at least, that can be comfortable and say, “Okay, I’m going to hang out here for the time being.” It’s like the hot weather we have now. You find the coolest spot where you can stay, and then just stay there and say, “Well, the rest of the world may be all hot, but at least I’ll be relatively cool here.” Then learn to maximize the comfort of the spot that you found. That’s called skillful fabrication. Then you take apart every other unskillful mood that comes by. That’s the way insight develops concentration. As the Buddha once said, “There’s no concentration, there’s no jhana without discernment, and no discernment without jhana.” The two have to go together. If you learn how to put them together, then both will become stronger. (crickets chirping)

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