The Buddha’s Therapy

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The Buddha’s intention in teaching was therapeutic. Every one of his teachings is a kind of medicine. We have to keep that in mind as we practice the Dhamma. We have to understand our disease. We have to understand which particular medicine is appropriate for us. Because if we misunderstand the medicine or apply the wrong medicine, we don’t understand what our disease is. The medicine will give its desired result. As the Buddha said, the big disease is suffering. But suffering has lots of particulars. Different people suffer in different ways. There’s that famous line from Anna Karenina, “All happy families are all alike. Unhappy families are each unhappy in their own particular ways.” So each of us, as we come to the practice, has our own particular sufferings. And it’s good to remember that the Buddha’s teachings have a wide range of medicines. There’s a tendency in the 20th century for teachers to boil things down to the absolute essentials. You only need a particular technique, and that will take care of everything. But the Buddha never taught that way. He taught the Eightfold Path. But there are many ways of approaching right view, many ways of approaching right mindfulness, right concentration. And we need to get a handle on our particular sufferings, our particular diseases, so we know which of the different types of medicine are appropriate. That chant we had just now, “Those who don’t discern suffering,” sounds strange. Of course we discern suffering. We know suffering, we experience suffering, but we don’t really discern it. If you really discerned it, you would understand why it was there and what you could do to put an end to it. That’s what the Buddha means. So our first duty is to put ourselves in a position where we can actually look at our suffering to see what it is. That’s why he teaches us to look at the breath in and of itself, the body in and of itself, to give ourselves at least a small foothold in this raging river. Or you can think of it as a little air-conditioned room in the midst of a burning fire. It may not be as cool as you’d like it, but at least it’s cooler than being out in the fire. So you hold on. Like the image of crossing the river, you’ve got a little raft. What we’d like is a great big raft, but you find yourself with a little tiny one. It may seem like it’s going to get washed over by the waves, but even then, at least you’ve got something to hold on to, so you can begin to get your bearings. You’ve got to have respect for your concentration, faith in your concentration, because it’s all too easy to let go and get carried off in the currents of whatever you’re desires may be, whatever the reactions to your suffering may be. These currents can turn into whirlpools. There’s craving that’s based on clinging to the aggregates. The aggregates come from craving, so they spin around. It’s useful to understand the Buddha’s analysis here, because it gives you at least a handle on what’s happening. Whether it can fully affect the cure right now, that depends on your ability to get the mind to be still and to look at things. But at least you get a beginning handle on it, those clinging aggregates. The Buddha doesn’t say that that’s what we are. He simply says that’s what suffering is made up out of. Our sense of self is also made up of clinging aggregates. So it means that our sense of self, as long as we hold on to it, is going to involve some suffering. But if it were pure suffering, we would have let go a long time ago. The problem is, our sense of self has also brought us some happiness, has brought us some sense of satisfaction, a sense of who we are, what kind of person we are, our good points. If there weren’t some pleasure here, we wouldn’t have held on to the sense of self. So when the Buddha brings the teaching of not-self, remember, it’s meant to be therapy. On the one hand, it’s meant to warn us that our sense of self can set us up for suffering. It may be just right for a certain set of circumstances, but when those circumstances change, that sense of who we are can turn on us. Things that used to seem valuable all of a sudden lose their value. Things that used to seem meaningful lose their meaning. And worse than that, they become an active source of more suffering. So as you meditate, it’s worth having a small place where you can sit and then reflect on that, that the sense of self you were depending on can turn on you. And when it turns on you, you don’t have to believe it. It looks like everything is meaningful, everything seems futile. That’s just your sense of self. That’s just your sense of self biting back. You can sit and be still enough. You can watch. What exactly is this made out of? There are certain feelings and there are certain perceptions from the way you perceive the world, the way you perceive yourself, which can turn on you. And if you’ve been holding on to them and gotten pleasure from them, it’s a shock when they turn. Your sense of self is also made out of certain ideas, thought constructs, and the way you’re aware of things. And, of course, there’s also your body, the form of the body that you identify with. And it’s either you identify with it as yourself or you think of it as belonging to yourself. Maybe you’re in the body or the body is in you. Putting the mind, though, in a place where it can watch these things, you realize that you don’t have to identify with them. It gives you at least a little breathing room. There are times when you don’t know what else you’re going to identify with. And as long as you’re on the path, there will be other things you need to identify with for the time being. Identify with that little spot of stillness inside. Hold on to that. Give it a chance to grow. Have some trust in it. It might not be as cool or as still as you’d like it to be, but at least it’s better than jumping into the fire or jumping into the ocean. It’s better than jumping into the waves of the river without anything to hold on to. Have some respect for it. Over time, it will provide you with a more solid foundation. So you can start to comprehend your suffering, to see where it’s coming from, and seeing that the things you’ve been identifying with have turned on you. There’s a passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about the five aggregates as murderers. He gives the example of someone who wants to assassinate a king. So he takes a job as the king’s servant. He’s very trustworthy. He gets up in the morning before the king, and he goes to sleep after the king at night and looks after the king’s every need. So the king gets more and more trusting. Then when the servant gets the king in a still place where nobody else is looking, he can stick a knife between his ribs and that’s it. As the Buddha said, even when he was the faithful servant, he was still a murderer. His intentions were murderous. Of course, the five aggregates don’t have intentions. But if you let your happiness depend on them, you get more and more heedless, more and more trusting, and then they turn on you. So what do you do? You learn how to turn them into a path. That’s what you do when you develop right concentration. Right mindfulness is all of the other factors of the path. These things are also made up of form and feeling and perceptions and thought constructs and consciousness, but they’re a lot more trustworthy than the other selves that we could create out of the aggregates. If you learn to hold on to them, they will take you across. And it’s by pursuing them that you’ll get all the way to the end. That’s how you get beyond the suffering. You can’t just run away from it, because it follows you otherwise. If you don’t understand it, it’ll just keep after you. You’ll find yourself grabbing at this, grabbing at that, and in each case it’s going to be more clinging and more suffering. That’s the way it is for everybody. It may not sound like much consolation, but at least it helps to take the “why me?” attitude and give it some perspective. Realize that this is a universal problem for different peoples. The particulars of your suffering may vary from person to person, but the general outlines are all the same. It all comes from holding on to these aggregates. And not only holding on to them, thinking that they’re you. The Buddha’s purpose in teaching about the aggregates and also teaching the not-self is to help you take your suffering apart, bit by bit, analyze it. This is an aspect of meditation that we often miss. We often think that meditation is about not thinking, but actually it’s getting the mind in a still place where it can think things through clearly, analyze them. The Buddha gives you the tools for analyzing. Take this huge mass of suffering, and he calls it a mass, dukkha khandha, like a mass of fire, he says. But you can take it apart bit by bit by bit, break it down. So instead of being this huge mountain of solid rock, you realize it’s lots of little decisions, lots of little pieces of gravel. When you’re dealing with a pile of gravel rather than a solid mountain of rock, you find you can take it apart bit by bit by bit. And it’s a lot more manageable. And it’s this way of taking it apart, bit by bit, that you finally work through it. It takes patience. In the practice of concentration, it’s meant to give you the strength you need to have that patience, so the path doesn’t hold all of its rewards for the very end. So it helps to have a large picture of the Buddha’s range of medicines, so you can get a better idea of his general approach to the course of therapy, and also how it might apply to your particular case. Realize that each of us here has different particulars, and we’re taking different pieces of Dhamma medicine, so that what one person might be pursuing right now may not be right for other people right now. It’s a particular thing. It’s an individual case. It’s like going to a hospital. One person may be getting radiation treatments, another person may be getting shots, another person may be getting creams. Or a patient who said, “Well, radiation treatments work for me, and maybe they’re going to work for you.” Well, it may not be what you need. But the best way to understand what you need is to try to get the mind as still as you can, and try to analyze this suffering that you’ve got. To what extent is it clinging to form? To what extent is it clinging to a feeling, a perception, or a series of perceptions, or thought constructs, or consciousness? It’s not just feelings in general. There are particular feelings, particular perceptions, particular thought constructs. Try to get a sense of what’s a good antidote for that particular way of looking at things, that particular way of feeling things. That way you personalize your course of therapy, your course of treatment. You learn to use the Dhamma for its intended goal, the end of suffering, through understanding. It’s through discernment, the Buddha said, that beings are purified. It’s through effort that suffering is put to an end. So it’s a combination of right effort and discernment that will get you to the goal.

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