Heartfelt Distinctions

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When the Buddha would tell the story of his quest for awakening, he pointed out that it began with his realization of aging, illness, and death. How as a young, healthy, and alive young man, he had a tendency to look down on those who were sick, those who were old, and those who were dead. And the realization came to him that he, too, someday would be sick, old, and dead. And it was not appropriate for him to have that attitude. They were all in the same boat. And they went on to reflect that happiness he had found, or the various happinesses that he was enjoying, would come to an end. And they realized he’d have to do something about that. His life would be wasted if it was just devoted to pleasures that would end with aging, end with illness, and end with death. So he looked for that unaging, undying quality, searched for many years, having realized that sensual pleasure was not going to take him to happiness. He went to the other extreme, tormented himself for six years, and realized, finally, that self-torment was not going to take him to true happiness either. So where would he go? He stopped to realize that there had been a point when he was young. He’d actually spontaneously gotten into the first jhana. And the question arose in his mind, “Would that be the way to awakening?” And immediately following it, there was this conviction, “Yes, that would be the way.” But at that point, his body was so severely emaciated that he couldn’t attain that state. So he gave up his austerities, began to eat enough to nourish the body, and then pursued the practice of right concentration, which he realized eventually had to be helped by seven other qualities, from right view all the way through right mindfulness. And that was what finally led him to the deathless that he was looking for. So he devoted the rest of his life to teaching that path, teaching the reality of that dimension that can be touched with the body, as he said, or touched with the mind. Touching with the body means not so much that you touch it with your hands, but that you experience it right where you’re experiencing the body right now. It’s a total experience, larger than all the six senses combined. But having found that happiness, it’s interesting that the topic of his first talk was suffering. He prefaced it with his realization that he was suffering. He talked about how the two extremes of sensual indulgence and self-torture didn’t work. He said what did work was the middle way. No, it’s middle not in the sense that it’s halfway between pleasure and pain, but that its attitude towards pleasure and pain is different. On the one hand, you try to abandon sensual passion, but you focus on developing the pleasure of a well-concentrated mind. And that’s free attitude towards pain and suffering. He had to divide it into two types. As you’ll see later in his teachings, there’s simply the stress that comes from the fact that things arise and pass away. People die and are reborn and then die again and are reborn again, over and over and over again. And there’s a stress that goes with the changing of what’s happening. All these fabrications. But that, he pointed out, is not the stress that weighs down the mind. The stress that weighs down the mind is the stress that comes from craving, clinging, and ignorance. And there’s nothing that can be done about the fact that things arise and pass away. But there can be something done about the stress that comes from craving, clinging, and ignorance. That’s the stress in the four noble truths. So remember that when you look at stress as one of the three characteristics, and stress in the context of the four noble truths, you’re talking about two different things. We live in a world where things are changing all the time. But the only reason we suffer from that is because we cling to things. The mind takes on an identity, wants a particular desire, and builds an identity around that desire. And then, for all the effort that goes into that pursuit of happiness, we end up disappointed. We end up losing what we’d spent so much time trying to gain. That’s the nature of ordinary, everyday searches for happiness. But the Buddha, as he said, said that there is another kind of happiness that lies beyond all this, which comes from getting to know the mind, seeing exactly where in the mind, what activities of the mind, add unnecessary stress, unnecessary suffering to the changes of the world. That’s why our practice is training the mind so it can get to know itself, to see where it holds on to things that cause suffering. So this is why the Buddha taught about suffering and stress, dukkha. That’s the main topic of his first teaching. In fact, he said that’s what his teaching was all about, the fact that there is suffering. But he also taught about the end of suffering. He didn’t just leave you there. He wanted to show you the way out. This is why his emphasis on suffering and stress is not pessimistic. It’s just the opposite. He’s like a doctor who has the cure, and so he’s not afraid to talk about a particular disease. Suppose there were a cure for cancer. The doctors who had the cure would not be afraid to talk about it, ask about it, point out its existence. It’s the ones who have no cure. They don’t want to mention it. They want to pretend you’ve got some other disease. So the Buddha’s emphasis on stress was not pessimistic. It was more clear-sighted, and he wants us to be clear-sighted as well. We need to see where many of the things that we love and cherish are actually causing us suffering. There’s a story where a man has come from burying his child. In those days, when you went to a funeral, you bathed yourself with water afterwards, so it was all wet. The Buddha said, “Where are you coming all wet in the middle of the day? Where are you coming from?” “I’ve come from burying my only child.” And the Buddha said, “Ah, yes, there is pain and suffering that comes from those who are dear.” The man was incensed. He said, “I love my child. I’ve got so much joy from my child. How can you say this?” And he walked off. The Buddha was not saying that we shouldn’t cherish one another, that we shouldn’t look after one another. But there is that quality of feeding off of one another. Trying to find our happiness off of one another. That’s where we suffer. And so it’s an important distinction to make. We’re talking today about the mind making lots of distinctions. That’s part of the purely intellectual side of the mind. But it’s not just pure intellect, the distinctions the Buddha makes, the distinctions of the mind are there because they’re important for the issues of the heart. So we can see, what are we doing that’s making us suffer? What are we doing that’s not? What are we doing that can put an end to suffering? That’s the basic distinction that’s really important. And it speaks directly to the heart’s need for true happiness, its desire for true happiness, which is something that the Buddha honors. What he’s not interested in is all the academic distinctions that really aren’t relevant to the question. Why is there suffering and how can it be ended? But the distinctions that do focus on this issue are very important. This is why we have to be very clear about them. The Buddha is not saying not to love one another and not to have special affection for those who are close to us. He talks about honoring your parents, husbands honoring their wives, wives honoring their husbands. Parents looking after their children, children looking after their parents. These are all good things. Gratitude, he says, is what keeps society alive. It’s what holds everything together. It’s like the linchpin in a wheel. It holds the wheel onto the cart so the cart can move. Without that linchpin, the wheel would come off and the cart would just crash and that’d be it. So it’s gratitude that holds everything together in our society. We need it. But he just warns about the extent to which affection can hide the clinging and attachment, where we feel that we need to feed off the other person one way or another in order to find happiness. We have to look very carefully at our own minds, because many times our virtues mask some unskillful attitudes. It’s something we don’t like to look at, but it’s there. And if we don’t want to look at it, we’ll never see it, and we’ll never learn how to have our virtues without the unskillful attitudes. You have to be very careful in looking at your own mind. To what extent is affection a skillful attitude, and where does it hide something unskillful? To what extent is desire good? To what extent is it bad? When is goodwill appropriate? When is equanimity appropriate? These are important distinctions because they bear directly on this question, “Why does the mind create unnecessary suffering?” Even though the emphasis may be, “Why does it create unnecessary suffering for itself?” the fact that you’re weighing yourself down with those unnecessary sufferings means you’re less able to help other people. You’re already carrying a huge load. You can’t shoulder any of theirs. This is why the Buddha emphasized the quality of discernment so much. It’s the discernment that makes the proper distinctions. And see which distinctions are proper, which ones are irrelevant, exactly where the distinctions lie. So it’s not just the cold intellect acting. It’s the citta, which covers both mind and heart, as a unified quality. We want both the mind and the heart to be talking to each other, listening to each other, because it’s only when they work together that they can follow the path. The Buddha is not just talking about making intellectual distinctions, or just following inarticulate feelings. It’s a matter of learning how to develop both sides so that the whole heart can experience the end of suffering in a way that’s a gift for ourselves and a gift to all those around us.

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