Ripples Go Far

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We develop the sublime attitudes every evening as a way of opening up and airing out the mind. Because when you’re focused on your troubles, your suffering, your issues, you suffer a lot. Because the range is small and the pain is big. And so, of course, it seems overwhelming. But when you expand your range, you begin to realize that the pain is a lot smaller. This is one of the basic principles the Buddha uses in contemplating aging, illness, death, separation, and the fact of karma. You’re not the only person who ages or has pains and illnesses. You’re not the only person who dies. You’re not the only person who’s separated from those you love. It happens all over the world. And somehow you might think that the fact that it’s everywhere would make the pain even greater. But what it does is it takes the focus away from you. It’s not just you. You’re not the only victim. You’re not the only person suffering. It’s not like the universe is dumping on you and nobody else right now. It’s dumping on everybody. At one time or another. And that takes the concentration of pain away. There’s a story of King Pasenadi. He was visiting with the Buddha one day, and one of his ministers came up and said, “You know, your favorite queen has just died.” And the king broke down and started crying. Then after he was finished, the Buddha said, “When have you ever heard of anyone who was born who didn’t die? When have you ever heard of any relationship where there wasn’t separation?” That was his way of comforting the king. Then he went on to say, “If there’s any sense that you feel that something is accomplished by expressing your grief, by eulogies, by honoring the dead, honoring the ones who’ve been separated from, go ahead and do it. But when it starts getting self-indulgent, that’s when you have to stop. You realize that grief is something that’s largely written because of your sense of loss. We think that we’re sympathetic for the person who’s gone, but so much of it is our own sense of loss. So to lift the burden on that I that’s suddenly weighed down by so much suffering, you begin to realize that it’s not all concentrated on you. The same principle applies to more ordinary pains. You’re sitting with pain in your body. Sometimes you wonder why you’re doing this. And the answer is that this is something that happens to everybody. And if you keep in mind that you can’t face pain now, when you’re relatively strong, your mind is relatively clear. How are you going to face it when it becomes a lot stronger, a lot heavier? And the mind is not quite so ready to deal with it, unless you’ve trained it. The other reason you’re doing this is because you realize that your actions have an impact not only on you, but also on other people. And if you’re feeling weighed down by your pain, you don’t have much time or energy for other people. This is why we extend thoughts of goodwill, compassion, sympathetic joy. It’s part of our motivation for the training. So it’s not just our story, or our pain, or our issues. You realize that the state of your mind has a ripple effect out to others as well, and you want the ripples to be good. So it’s an important part of the meditation that you get out of the little narratives you have about yourself, yourself, yourself. Think in larger terms. After all, that’s how the Buddha gained his understanding into karma. You had that first knowledge on the night of his awakening, knowledge of his past, lives many, many aeons back. And as long as he was just focused on himself, he couldn’t see the larger pattern, didn’t understand what was going on. Because he said,”Sometimes you look at one life, you do something really, really harmful, and the next life you’re up in heaven. Or you do something really good, and the next life you’re down in hell.” So if you’re just following one thread through the whole tapestry, it’s a pretty crazy thread. But then when you see the larger pattern, then you understand what’s going on and where to focus your attention. That’s the second knowledge that he gained on the night of his awakening. And that’s when he began to focus in on the mind in the present moment. This principle is a really important one. You’ve got to take the larger view, both of your own life and of the lives of all the people around you. Because otherwise the meditation becomes very self-indulgent, very narcissistic. “This is what I’m doing for myself right now, and that’s it.” And that gets old really fast. When you take the larger view, it’s a lot easier to depersonalize what’s going on in the mind. So a thought that comes up isn’t just your favorite thought or your favorite attitude, but it’s just a thought and attitude. And then you can watch it. Or if while you’re meditating you realize that this is not where you want to go, you can learn how to put it aside and not get so entangled in the content. It’s like walking past a TV and the show is on. And you have the choice of just walking right past it and not getting involved, or sitting down and all of a sudden you find yourself concerned about this character or that character. And the question is why? It’s just dots of color on the TV. So learn to look at your thoughts as dots of color in the mind, little dots of words that have a quality of intention underlying them. You want to look at that quality to see what it is. Is there lust? Is there passion? Is there aversion? Is there greed? What’s driving these thoughts? And when you see the forces driving it, that’s when you begin to realize it’s not really worth getting involved in. Again, it’s like watching a TV. What drove that TV show? There was a lot of greed. And there’s somebody out there who wants you to believe something. Do you trust those people? You don’t even know them. And the amount of greed that drives the media, it’s scary. But then you look at your own mind. The amount of greed, aversion, and delusion that drives your own mind, that’s pretty scary too. Can you trust the little shows that the mind makes for itself? Are we driven by these factors? We do, because these things come from within us. But that’s one of the reasons why we developed that teaching on not-self, is to learn how to look at the various forces that drive the mind. You realize that you don’t have to identify with them. It’s like all those different committee members in the mind, the ones that want to meditate, the ones that don’t want to meditate, where do they come from? They came from strategies you had in the past for finding happiness. And some of those strategies are things that you cooked up way, way back when your powers of observation were pretty poor. And it seemed to work, but then your standards for what counted as happiness were pretty crude. So you’ve got these crude, ignorant members, and then you’ve got the devious ones, the ones where you got some pleasure, but there was a huge amount of pain and difficulty to follow that pleasure. And these are the ones that are constantly in denial. They’re not responsible for that pain. Somebody else was. So you’ve got all these unreliable members in the committee of your mind. The purpose of the meditation is to sort them out. So you realize that these are the ones you can’t trust, like in that Dhamma talk by John Lee. So how do you know that every thought that comes popping up into your mind actually comes from you? Maybe it comes from the germs in your bloodstream. Maybe it comes from spirits who are hanging around you. So we’ve got to sort out these different committee members, and that’s why it’s important to get out of your narrative for a while. So you can look at who’s making up the narrative and what purpose do they have. Who’s the team of writers? Who’s producing? Which members are they? Are they the skeptical members? Are they the lazy members? The forgetful members? The scattered-brain ones? The really ignorant ones? These are the ones who are going to weaken you as you have to face up with the inevitable problems of aging, illness, death, and separation. You want to strengthen the good ones, the ones who have conviction in the principle that your actions really do make a difference and you have to be careful about them. You can’t just say, “Well, I want to be spontaneous and have a good time.” There are ways of having a pleasurable time without having to just say, “I’ll give in to whatever thing comes popping into the mind.” You’ve got to be responsible. You’ve got to be persistent. You’ve got to put effort into this. You’ve got to be mindful to remember what you need to do and what you really have learned from your many years of experience. Develop the members that are focused, the members that are disciplined. These are the strengths in your mind. Those are the committee members that you really want to encourage. And those are the ones that do best when you’re not just watching TV shows in the mind, watching old movies in the mind. They’re the ones that are strengthened when you learn how to deconstruct those thought worlds. So learn how to step back, take the larger view, have a larger perspective. It’s not just you in there. It’s not just you in the world. It’s taking that larger perspective that helps to sort everything out. As to what’s really important and what really needs to be done. So you don’t spend your life watching old movies and then suddenly find that the plug is pulled and you don’t know what to do. If you’ve been watching the process, you’ll know precisely what to do. Remember, that’s one of the reasons the Buddha teaches us to train the mind. It’s because if the mind isn’t trained, it’s just going to give in to its old drives and it’s going to try to find another life and then another life and then another life. We meditate and focus right here because the processes that lead to this constant wandering on are in operation right here, right now. Sometimes we’re told, “Well, all we have to do is focus on the present moment. We don’t have to think about the Buddha’s teachings on other lifetimes.” But if you don’t understand the impact that your choices in the present moment have, both now and over the long term, your understanding of the present moment is not going to be deep enough. And your understanding of how deeply you have to dig to root things out is going to be pretty superficial. So even though we’re focusing here on the present moment, the ripple effect goes out. Even though you’re training just your own mind, the ripple effect goes out. So make sure that it’s for the good.

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