You Don’t Have to Suffer

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There’s a passage where the Buddha talks about experiencing the results of your past bad karma, saying that it really depends on your attitude right now. This is one of the reasons why we meditate. It’s to teach ourselves how not to suffer from the results of unskilled karma. Think about the implications of that. Just because you’ve done something unskillful doesn’t mean you deserve to suffer. The word “deserve” doesn’t appear in the Buddhist teachings in this way. You may have done something unskillful in the past, but that doesn’t mean that right now you’ve got to suffer for it. You train your mind how not to suffer. Your training is protection. An important part of that training is developing an attitude of goodwill—goodwill for yourself, goodwill for all the people around you, goodwill for everybody. As the Buddha said, when you have goodwill for everyone, it’s easier to maintain your precepts with regard to everyone. No matter what they do, you’re not going to get back at them. And you’re not going to do anything that’s going to harm yourself right now or down into the future. For instance, when you’re experiencing pain right now, when someone’s lying about you, how do you not suffer? On the one hand, you reflect on the fact that everybody born into the human world has both good and bad karma. Then you realize that you’ve got to protect yourself from creating more bad karma. So you try to have goodwill, even for the people who are lying about you, spreading rumors around. But this means that you have to have goodwill for them regardless of what their behavior is. Some schools of Buddhism say that you have goodwill for everybody because you reflect on their innate Buddha nature. But the Buddha never talked about that. He said you have goodwill for them despite whatever they’re doing. They don’t have to earn your goodwill. Again, there’s no word of deserving here. Simply, you want to protect yourself from doing unskillful things. When you treat people as if they don’t have feelings, when you’re not concerned about their happiness, it’s so easy to mistreat them. So regardless of what they’re doing, you’ve got to have goodwill for them. It’s to protect yourself from yourself, basically, to protect yourself from your defilements. So goodwill for yourself and goodwill for others all come together. At the same time, if you really have goodwill for yourself, you’re going to notice where you’re causing yourself unnecessary suffering. It’s that suit of the many arrows. The Buddha talks about two arrows. Actually, it’s more. You’re shot with one arrow. Whatever happens as a result of your past karma, that’s the one arrow. And then you turn around and shoot yourself with more arrows, getting upset, getting disturbed, getting outraged. All the narratives that you can create around that first arrow, those are the whole quiver of arrows that you shoot yourself with. So you’ve got to remind yourself that if you really are concerned about your true happiness, you can’t give in to those habits. This is where the Buddha talks about the other way in which you learn not to suffer from the results of past karma. That’s by learning how to train your mind not to be overwhelmed by pain and how not to be overwhelmed by pleasure. The practice of concentration helps a lot here. Even before you get to the really subtle levels of discernment, the simple fact that you’re able to train your mind to be still in the face of whatever, that helps you to deal with an awful lot of pain and not get involved in the narratives and the weaving of a story. You just stay still in the face of these things, and you notice wherever your mind reaches out to latch onto these things. This is where the contemplation of the three perceptions is usually helpful. Remember that whatever’s going to happen is inconstant. It’s not going to last. It’s stressful. If you get involved with it, it’s going to weigh you down. So why do you want to claim it as your own? And Jhammahabhava says it’s like a stick. These three perceptions are like a stick for training a monkey who’s always grabbing hold of things. As soon as it grabs hold, you hit its hand with the stick so it drops whatever it’s holding onto. There are so many things that we want to hold on to. There are so many things that we want to grab onto that we claim as ours. Your name, for example. You don’t like hearing your name being used in a way that’s not fair. But just remind yourself, it’s not your name. It’s a name that someone else gave you. You weren’t born with it. The world gave it to you. And if it’s something that the world gives you, the world can do anything it wants to with it. So it’s there for you. It’s none of your business. It’s none of yours. You have to learn how not to be overcome by pain. You also have to learn how not to be overcome by pleasure. If the mind has the habit of letting itself wallow in pleasure, it’s going to go around trying to wallow in whatever and find itself tripping into cesspools, tripping into mud pits, because it likes to wallow. So when pleasure comes up, you have to be still as well, in the face of the pleasure, and use those three perceptions. Again, the pleasure is impermanent. It’s going to come and it’s going to go. We somehow think that if we can gulp it down as much as possible, we’ll get as much as we can out of it. But that’s not the case. When there’s pleasure, it’ll do its work. It’ll do whatever work it can do for you. But if you grab onto it, you turn it into something stressful. So again, remind yourself it’s not yours. It comes and it goes. It’ll do its work. The pleasure in the body eases the body. Pleasure in the mind eases the mind. But you have to be watchful. You have to be heedful. Because the habits you develop around pleasure then turn into the same habits you develop around pain. If you like to gulp down the pleasure, you’re going to gulp down pain. So remind yourself that these habits that we’re developing as we meditate, learning to be still, this is what the development of threshold consciousness is all about. It enables you to sit with pain and sort of take it apart and realize that you have some skills so that you’re not simply on the receiving end of the pain, that you can go and probe and attack and question and look into it. You can be more proactive. When you’re more proactive, you’re a moving target. The pain can’t hit you as easily. Then the same with pleasure. Learn to question it. Is this a pleasure that’s actually helpful for you, or is it going to be harmful? There is the pleasure of concentration, but you’ve got to get beyond being attached to that. That’s what fixed penetration is for, when the mind is really still. These terms momentary concentration, threshold concentration, and fixed penetration come from the commentaries. But they’re useful. Momentary concentration is the kind of concentration everybody has, but it doesn’t withstand pain, it doesn’t withstand boredom, anything the least bit unpleasant, and it’s gone. But if you learn how to sit with unpleasant things and work through them, for example, when the breath is not all that comfortable, can you stick with it long enough to smooth out the discomfort, to untangle any tangles? To loosen up any sense of the mind’s clamping down? When you realize that you can approach that level of discomfort with your set of tools, it’s not so scary. And your mind can actually stick with the breath in the confidence that it can work things through. That’s when it turns into threshold concentration. Now, the problem with threshold concentration is when it hits pleasure, it loses its focus. So again, you’ve got to remember, even though it’s really nice, you can’t just sit back and wallow. You’ve got work to do in the pleasure. Spread it around. Try to maintain a large frame of reference for your awareness, feeling the whole body or stretching out from the body. When you think about space or awareness as a topic, that way you can overcome discomfort. The problem of losing focus because it’s pleasant, the mind gets really fixed. And this is just on the level of concentration. There’s an even greater freedom that comes when you start looking deeper into the issues about how the mind embroiders things, how it weaves things into huge tapestries. It starts with the little tapestries. But as you’ve got your set of tools here, you can develop this larger frame of awareness based both on your goodwill for yourself and others and on the skills you develop around pleasure and pain. You find that whatever comes up, either inside the body or in your dealings with other people, doesn’t have to oppress you or get you down. There’s that passage where the Buddha says there are people who are harming you, or they have harmed you, or they’re going to harm you. And what do you think? You think, “Well, what should I expect?” They’re harming people you love. They have harmed them. They will harm them. What should you expect? They’re doing nice things to people you hate who’ve been really cruel to you. Or they will do it. Or they have done it. But you say, “What should I expect?” And then finally he says, “You’ve learned how not to get worked up over impossibilities.” So on the one hand, it sounds like he’s got a pretty low estimation of the human race, a very realistic one. This is the way human beings are. Even then, though, you have to have goodwill for them. However they want to misbehave, that’s their business. You have to maintain your responsibility for your thoughts, words, and deeds. They can’t pull you down. But your choices in what you do and say and think, that can. So you’ve got to be careful. So you use these skills as your protection. And you learn how not to harm yourself in the present moment, and how not to harm other people. There’s a greater and greater sense of freedom. There’s a lot less fear. You have the confidence that comes when you know that you’ve got the skills and the tools that will enable you to deal with whatever comes up. So we don’t have to pretend that the world is a wonderful place. We quite frankly expect that it’s not going to be. It’s going to be wonderful. But the Buddha gave us some wonderful skills to make the most of them.

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