A Special Path

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When you look at the list of perfections, they all seem pretty generic. Generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, energy or persistence, endurance, truthfulness, goodwill, equanimity. These are virtues the world around. It’s hard to think of any religion or culture that would say there were bad things. It’s only when you look in the details that you see that they really do differ. And particularly that fourth perfection, discernment. What does it mean to be wise? To buy low and sell high. To fear some supernatural being. There are lots of different definitions of what wisdom or discernment might be. And it’s right here where the Buddha’s teaching is very distinctive. The Buddha defines right view as knowledge in terms of the vulnerable truth. It’s often cited as the distinctive teaching of Buddhas. This is what separates Buddhas from other teachers. This is where they focus. They see that understanding the problem of suffering and learning how to put an end to suffering leads to release. That’s something you can do. And it’s the big issue to focus on. What in the mind is causing suffering? That’s really distinctive. Because it’s only by looking at the process of how suffering happens, how you can take pleasant things or unpleasant things and turn them into suffering, either way. It’s only by seeing that as a process that you can learn to get beyond it. And in getting beyond that, it has a huge impact on the mind, as all the defilements of the mind, all your greed, aversion, and delusion tend to circle around your suffering. All the different voices that complain about it and add to it, and both complain and add to it. When you focus on the issue of suffering, it’s a really good thing. It’s a good place to see these voices in action, to understand what’s going on, exactly what are your attitudes toward pain. When you see your attitudes towards pain, you also see an awful lot about your attitude towards the world in general. Years back, when I first came to the States, I got a phone call one day from a man who’d been a martial arts expert. He said when he was younger, he could do all these amazing things with martial arts. But now that he was getting older, he was riddled with backaches, all kinds of diseases. He felt that God had turned his back on him. And there you are. There’s pain, there’s suffering, and all of a sudden God gets drawn into the picture. It’s a question of whether God is trustworthy or not, fair or not. And someone who didn’t have God in his worldview would have other stories, other ideas about what was going on. That man, by the way, was suffering intensely because he felt he’d been mistreated by the force that created the universe. And so when the pain is intense enough, you find all kinds of things coming up in the mind. And either you believe them and run with them and suffer, or else you can step back and ask, “Where does that come from? What does it do? What good is it?” I don’t know of any other teaching that asks you to do this, to look at your thoughts as processes. So you can figure out where in there is something that’s causing the stress, causing the suffering. So this is what we’re going to do. What’s distinctive about the Buddhist teachings? It’s important that you focus right there, that the Buddha gives you the ability to deal with your own suffering, overcome your own suffering. Of course, he doesn’t give it to you, but he shows you the way that you can do this. You already have that ability. It’s simply a matter of being willing to listen to someone else who’s done the job well. This is where conviction comes into practice, because the path he recommends is not an easy one. It takes time, it takes energy, it requires a lot of renunciation. If you don’t really have conviction that this is going to work, or at least has the possibility of working, you’re not going to be up for it. This is why the Buddha prefaces the Four Noble Truths with what he calls mundane right view. Mundane right view has a fair amount in common with other teachings. There’s the belief that generosity is good, that you have a debt of gratitude to your parents. But then it begins to part ways with other issues. One in particular is that your actions have results. In fact, it’s your actions that shape the extent to which you’re going to experience pleasure or pain, and that there is a life after this one. And there are actually people who know this. It’s not just a theory. There are people who’ve practiced and developed the mind to the point where they really know these things. That’s something you take on conviction. It’s your working hypothesis. This Buddhism has in common with other teachings. But what the Buddha does with it is very distinctive. The question is, how can we put an end to all this going on to the next life? Because there’s not just one next life, there are many. And by seeing that as a problem, then you begin to dig down into the mind through the factors of birth, becoming. Clinging, craving, feeling, contact—all the way down into fabrication and ignorance. To see what we create around our experience and the way we prepare the mind to meet up with experience all out of ignorance. And this is why we suffer. If you can bring knowledge of the four noble truths—in other words, seeing things in terms of the four noble truths—and then following the duties that are appropriate to them. Trying to comprehend the suffering, which means learning to watch it. What’s going on here? Why is there suffering? Sometimes you say, “Well, it’s because there’s pain.” Well, we can also suffer around pleasure. The simple knowledge that the pleasure doesn’t last, that can cause us pain. But what is it? It’s not the pleasure or pain in and of itself. It’s this preparation we have in the mind. The way we think about our pleasures and pains. The way we perceive them. Even something as simple as the way we breathe around them. That can turn any situation or any sensation into one of suffering. So that’s what the problem is. Unfortunately, you can develop the qualities that are needed to comprehend this. Then when we see the causes of suffering, to abandon them. So you develop the qualities. That’s the path. To abandon the causes of suffering as you comprehend them, as you comprehend the sufferings. To realize the end of suffering. It’s a very positive teaching. You don’t have to wait for someone else to come and do the work for you, hoping that they’ll do it and not really sure that they’re fair or that they’re willing to come and help. But you’re also not in a position of saying, “Well, it’s going to be some suffering in life, but that’s the best there is, so put up with it.” That’s not the kind of teaching the Buddha would give you. There is an end to suffering, and you can realize it. You follow the duties that are appropriate to the four noble truths. So this is what’s distinctive about the path. As the Buddha told his last student, “It’s only where the Eightfold Path, and that includes right view, is found that you’re going to find awakened people.” Then he wanted to say, “It’s only in the Buddha’s teachings that you’re going to find this.” We often hear that Buddhism is very tolerant. After all, it doesn’t see the other religions of the world as the work of the devil. But tolerance doesn’t mean endorsement. The Buddha was quite critical of religions and taught other views, focused on other issues as the important ones. He said, “It’s only here, with right view, that you’re going to be able to get to the end of suffering.” But where do those paths go? He compares himself to someone who can see people following different paths. There are paths that go to hell. There are paths that go to heaven. There are paths that go to the human world. There’s a path that goes to release. And he’s there pointing out the way. We’re the ones who have to follow it. After all, he simply points the way to us. He’s been there. He knows. He’s come back to tell us. But as anyone who’s been on a mountain knows, not all paths lead to the top. Some of them lead you to a cliff and you fall down. Others just simply lead you back to where you started. Others lead you to nice little places, but not necessarily the top. It’s the same with that idea that all rivers lead to the ocean. Well, not all of them do. In Australia they have this big lake, Lake Erie. The rivers that flow into Lake Erie, that’s it. They just evaporate. Here we’ve got all the rivers that flow into the Great Basin, where they evaporate. The water will eventually get up in the air and have a chance to fall down again. Hopefully it’ll fall into another river basin. So even though it may seem nice to say, “Well, everybody’s going to get there,” the Buddha himself would never make that statement. Because he knows you have to follow a certain path, and not everybody’s going to follow it. Everyone’s free not to follow it. Let’s put it that way. But you’re also free to follow it. So it’s up to you to decide how you’re going to use your freedom. The Buddha never pretended to be our Creator or our God or anything. So he’s in no position to order us as to what to do, unless you become a monk and part of the order is to follow the rules. But he does speak with the voice of an expert. And the advice he gives is for the sake of our own true happiness. That kind of teacher, that kind of teaching, is hard to find. So make the most of it while you can.

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