Windows of Opportunity

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A lot of the really subtle wisdom in the Buddhist teachings grows out of some very basic principles, commonsensical principles. For instance, there’s that one that the sign of a wise person is knowing what duties or responsibilities fall to him or her and which ones don’t. Learning to take up the responsibilities that are your responsibilities and letting go of the ones that are not. And you can trace this principle all the way through the teachings, all the way to that distinction between the suffering and the four noble truths, which is your responsibility, and the stress and the three characteristics, which is not your responsibility. In other words, you are responsible for the fact that your mind is weighed down by the suffering and stress that come from craving. And that’s something you really have to focus on. As for the stress inherent in the fact that things arise and pass away and are fabricated, there’s no way you’re going to change that. And so trying to take things that are going to change and stop them from changing, you’re taking on a duty that’s not yours, one that you really can’t do anyhow. But we try really hard. The difficulty in all this, of course, is knowing where the line is. What are your responsibilities? What are not your responsibilities? And this is where we have to develop sensitivity in the practice to see what we can change and when we can change it. They’ve done experiments with animals. If there’s a green bar, you push the green bar and you get food. If there’s a red bar, you push the red bar and you don’t get any food. And the animals can live with that. But in another group, sometimes you push the green bar and get food, and sometimes you don’t. Sometimes you push the red bar and get food, and sometimes you don’t. Those animals get crazy. That’s a pretty good description of what life is like for most people anyhow. A lot of things are not predictable. So what do you do? You have to, on the one hand, decide that there are a few things that you really do want seriously, and you’ve got to focus on those, because those are the things where you’re going to be able to see complex patterns most easily. And a lot of other things you’ve just got to let go. So here we are focusing on one big issue, which is how can we use these five aggregates here—form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness—how and when can we use them in a way that leads them to a happiness that lies beyond them? We have our windows of opportunity. We have to learn how to look for that. At the moment, we’re healthy enough to practice. The bodies are functioning pretty well. We’re in a good situation. But as the Buddha points out, this is not going to last forever. There’s turmoil in society. Things go wrong with your health. These make it very difficult to practice. So your brain starts functioning in weird ways. If you haven’t already attained something that lies beyond the brain, it really can get in the way. So you focus on the openings you have while you’re at it, and you decide, “This is what I want out of these openings.” The Buddha talks about the five aggregates as being beyond your control. But the thing is, they’re not totally beyond your control. If they were totally beyond your control, you wouldn’t be laying claim to them. You wouldn’t be assuming them to be yourself. It’s the fact that you can control them to some extent. You can control your body. You can gain mastery over your feelings. You learn, especially with practice and meditation, that the mind has this ability to focus on some potentials that’ll lead to pain and other potentials that’ll lead to pleasure. Sometimes we have an instinctive sense of how to do this, and we’re doing it to some extent, usually without a lot of skill. But with the path, as we practice on the path, you begin to see more and more clearly where the potentials for pleasure are, where the potentials for pain are, and how you can make use of those potentials for pleasure, even in the midst of pain, even in the midst of a lot of things that are totally beyond your control, there are some things that you do have a measure of control over. And you want to figure out what’s the most skillful use of that control, why you’ve got it. This is why the practice is strategic. It’s also why, when people ask, “How long is it going to take for me to gain jhana?” or “How long is it going to take to discreetly retreat?” You can’t say. There is no standard timeline. But some people practice and it leads to quick results in some areas and very slow in other areas. And it varies from person to person. And if you’re not really determined, if you really want to get beyond the vagaries of time and space, it’s very easy to get discouraged and decide, “Well, I’m going to do something else.” So you’ve got to have the determination. There are a few things that you really want to focus on—body, speech, mind—for the purpose of finding a true happiness. And if you see that there’s anything else that’s going to get in the way of that, any other form of happiness that’s going to get in the way, any kind of pleasure that’s going to get in the way, you’ve really got to be willing to let it go. There’s a lot of chaos that we live with in life. It’s like winds that are blowing from different directions. Now they blow from the south, now they blow from the north. If you have lots of different things that you’re focusing on, “I want this to be that way and I want that to be this way,” it’s like setting up lots of different sails that catch all these winds and they can capsize your boat very easily. But if you keep your focus honed down to what’s really essential, then the winds will blow. It’s like you don’t have the sails up, so the winds will blow and they don’t capsize your boat because there’s nothing to catch the wind. So given all the many things we could possibly want in life, we really have to be careful to choose the ones that are very important. Because if you choose things that are not important, the window of opportunity to where important things goes. There’s that famous story of the relative of the Buddha. He’s a Sakyana. I’ve forgotten his name. He spent all of his life pursuing the pleasures of alcohol. When he died, the Buddha said, “You know, if he’d been able to give up his alcohol and actually start practicing, if he’d started at an early age in life, he could have been coming around.” Even if he waited later, he still could have become a noble disciple. The problem was he just never got around to giving up his fascination with alcohol. So all of us have to look at our lives and see what are things we really do have to give up. The winds of life are blowing around us. We’re not going to get blown off course because we’re focusing on certain pleasures or certain ideas of what we think would be leading to happiness or things we want them to be this way or want them to be that way. You have to learn to read in your own life what are the things that you can have some control over that are not going to get in the way of ultimate happiness. And be alert to the fact that sometimes the boundary lines will change. Certain openings are there for a certain period of time, but then when the opening is gone, you’ve just got to drop it. Because the big opening you’re looking for, as the Buddha said, is that opening onto another dimension. If you keep your attention focused there, you’ll gain glimpses of opportunities that you would have missed otherwise. And when the opportunities actually come, there you are. You’re not wandering off after something else. You focus right there and you see it. You go for it. That way you can live in the changing conditions of the world—the north winds, the south winds, the east winds, the west winds, the turbulent winds, the cyclones, the tornadoes—and not get blown around. Because you don’t have anything to catch those winds. Your intentions are honed down to a fine point.

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