Letting Go of Pleasure & Pain

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The Buddha’s understanding of suffering is really important. He points out some obvious facts. Aging is suffering. It’s stressful. Illness, death, separation from those we love, having to stay with situations we don’t like and don’t love, not getting what we want. That’s the external side of suffering. But then he goes on to say in his summary, “The five clinging aggregates.” That brings the issue inside. It’s the clinging that makes us suffer. It’s because we hold on to things, we hold on to people, we hold on to all kinds of outside and inside things, trying to feed off them. In other words, we try to gain our happiness from things that really ultimately cannot provide a lasting happiness. And sometimes those things are skillful, and sometimes they’re not. The Buddha points out that there are types of pleasure that we’re looking for that really are unskillful, when we gain pleasure out of breaking the precepts, when we gain pleasure out of causing trouble. I mean, it’s really on a low level. But there are times when we take pleasure out of honorable things, good things, but even then they’re suffering, if we try to feed on these things. So what the Buddha tells us to do is to first develop some internal qualities that we can feed on, things that are more reliable, less harmful, less likely to disappoint. Getting the mind to settle down is an important one. Now, for a lot of us, getting the mind to settle down is pretty unreliable. It’s pretty hit or miss. It’s because we haven’t trained ourselves fully yet. And it’s very easy in the beginning stages to get discouraged. You just try to stay with the breath, and it’s like standing still and it skates when you first go out on the ice. You wobble and then you fall down. There are two ways you can respond to that. One is to never get out on the ice again. The other is to say, “Well, other people can do this. Why can’t I?” And you put time and effort into trying to do this well. And when you do, you find that it really works. How much time, how much effort? I’ve been asked that question I don’t know how many times, and there is no universal answer. There’s no ten thousand hour guarantee. The important thing is that you give it your full attention while you’re trying to do it. And you try to do it every day, every day. Because this is important. The mind needs to feed. And as the Buddha pointed out many times, if you don’t give it better food, it’s going to go back to its old ways of trying to feed off nice sights, nice sounds, nice tactile sensations. Nice feelings, nice perceptions, nice thoughts. The problem is, these things don’t stay nice all the time. You’ve got something that seems nice to begin with, and then it has its other side. So in order to pull yourself away from those old ways of feeding, try to feed off the sense of well-being and concentration. We just chanted the Eightfold Path, and the Buddha talks about the necessity of giving rise to skillful states. When they’re not there, you’ve got to give rise to them. And when they’re there, you try to maintain them and develop them to the culmination of their development. This is a balancing act. Opposed to the Buddha’s teachings on inconstancy, after all, everything that arises is going to pass away. How are you going to keep something steady? How are you going to keep it there? Well, you don’t really know those qualities of inconstancy, stress, and not-self until you try to push against them. So you’re trying to make the state constant. You want to be very balanced and just learn how to maintain that balance. And if you’re in too much of a hurry to push on, you lose it. So it’s a whole set of skills you have to develop around maintaining your balance right here, finding a good spot and then just staying there. Developing it enough so that it’s comfortable and then learning how to maintain it. Because these things grow from being maintained. So you’re trying to hold them. And again, holding them, not with a tightly clenched fist. In Thai they have a nice word, prakong, which means that you hover around something, like a child learning how to walk. If you hold the child, the child’s never going to learn how to walk on its own. If you’re too far away, the child may fall down. So you hover around so that the child can walk. And if it trips, you’re there to catch it. That’s the kind of attitude you want to have for your concentration. Give it some space and give it some protection. Allow it to grow. In this way, you develop a new source of food inside, a sense of well-being that’s nourishing, something you can tap into when you need it. That’s when difficult emotions come up. All too often we just jump into the emotion and say, “This is how I feel right now,” and we have the choice. You don’t have to go into that emotion. You can step back a bit. And the first aid you get in stepping back is to have some knowledge of the breath. What is the breath like when it feels really, really good? You can recreate that in spite of the emotion. I was talking this evening with someone who tends to have panic attacks, and he found that he just stopped breathing and suppressing his breath and worsened the panic attack. So even though the mind may be racing with all kinds of scary stuff, you can still breathe in a way that’s nourishing. When there’s anger, when there’s grief, when there’s fear, you can still face these things with a calming breath. In this way, you develop a refuge inside, something you can hold onto when the mind starts becoming its own enemy. Because that’s basically what the Buddha teachings on suffering are all about. We all want happiness, we all want well-being, and yet we look for happiness in the wrong ways. It turns around and it bites us. John Chah has a nice image. He says, “Happiness is like the tail end of a snake. Pain is like the head of the snake.” We don’t want to go near the head because it’ll bite us. But the tail doesn’t have any teeth. It looks like it’s safe. So we tell ourselves it’s okay where it’s far enough away from the snake, because after all, the head’s way down there on the other end of the body. So we can catch hold of the tail. Of course, what happens? You catch hold of the snake’s tail and it turns around and bites you, because these things are connected. There’s pain in pleasure, and there’s pleasure in pain. In other words, when the pain starts to change, there’s an element of pleasure there. When pleasure changes, it can also become painful. That’s the pleasure of sensuality. And even though there may be drawbacks in the pleasures of concentration, there’s a lot less suffering. So you’re trying to look in a better place for your happiness, a better place for your sources of food, your sources of nourishment. So try to develop this sense of being your own best friend. And as for the thoughts that would destroy your happiness, even though there are times when you feel like you’d be compelled, you have to think them, because after all, say somebody dies or somebody is in pain or suffering, we often feel that we’re obligated to suffer along with them. We’re feeling like we’re being disloyal if we don’t. But our suffering on their account doesn’t really help them. And actually, to be helpful to them you’ve got to strengthen your mind so that you’re not wounded by events. So you can be a pillar of strength for the other person. This applies to people who are still alive and people who’ve passed away. As I said last night, there’s a current of energy that comes from the mind. And when someone’s passed away, you want to make sure your current that you’re sending to that person is a good current, because they’re very sensitive, that sort of thing. So in this way, finding a source of well-being inside is an act of kindness not only to yourself but to other people who depend on you, other people who are affected by your actions, other people who are affected by your thoughts, words, and deeds. So learn how to look for your well-being inside. Learn how to train the mind. Because after all, the genuine sources of suffering, the things that really do weigh the mind down, are the ones that come from within. So if you retrain the mind so that it’s its friend instead of its enemy, then there’s nothing to weigh the mind down at all. Things happen outside, as they’ve happened before. Whether it’s good and bad, pleasure and pain, all kinds of things are going to happen. But when you’re not trying to feed on those things, they don’t weigh you down. We think we gain nourishment by feeding on these things, but they turn around and they feed on us, eat away at us. So when the mind is in a position where it no longer has any hunger, it doesn’t need to feed. Then both sides are released.

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