How Not to Suffer

September 22, 2014

It’s the nature of the mind when it’s untrained. It can take a good situation and make it worse, and take a bad situation and make it even worse than that. This is the habit we’ve got to learn how to undo and to turn around. So we can take a bad situation and make it better, and a good situation and make it even better than that. Of course, the word “situation” here covers two things, things outside and things inside. Because a lot of times when things are pretty bad outside and you can’t do much about them, you read the newspaper and almost everything you read in the newspaper is something that’s totally beyond your control to affect any difference at all. When you think about how big the problems of the world are, it can get pretty overwhelming. But you can’t let that get you down, or give up, or to see that the good you can do in the world is unimportant. You’ve got to take a totally different view. The most important thing in the world right now is what you’re doing. And so you want to do that carefully. We listen to the Dhamma, we read, so we can get an idea of what it means to do something really carefully, to do something really well. And we need ways to strengthen ourselves so that we can take that knowledge and actually put it to use. One, we need to strengthen our mindfulness so we can remember the good things. It’s so easy, when you’re suddenly surprised by events or something really bad happens, to forget whatever you’ve learned about the Dhamma. And it’s so easy to let other things you’ve learned through life come in and take its place. I’ve seen this recently. People suddenly say, “Well, forget about that first precept. Things in the world are really bad, worse than they’ve ever been before, and so we’ve got to drop all those old precepts.” Which is just a very strange set of values taking over. It’s the morality of a Hollywood movie in the ’50s, basically. When things are bad, you’ve got to shoot them. So we have to remember that what the Buddha taught has its reasons. Sometimes the reasons are obvious, and sometimes they’re not. But when he says that all killing is bad, all stealing, all engaging in illicit sex, all lying, all taking intoxicants, all these things are bad, then no matter how much advantage you may get from breaking these precepts in the short run, it’s going to get erased by the long run. There’s a passage where he says that there’s loss through losing wealth, there’s loss through losing your relatives, there’s loss through illness. But none of those kinds of loss are as serious as loss of your virtue and loss of your right views. So you want to work on stocking up your right views and then strengthening your mindfulness. And strengthen your understanding of why the Buddha was right when he said that. It’s not the case that he’ll explain everything for you. When I was in Thailand studying with Ajahn Phuong, there was a lot that he didn’t explain. On the one hand, it would have been easy for me to write it off as, “Well, that’s just the way Thai people are.” And seeing things happening in the monastery, “Well, that’s just the way Thai people do things.” And I’m not going to bring that back to the States. That could have been my attitude. But I picked up very quickly that, as Ajahn Phuong said, there are reasons behind everything. And one of the ways of developing your discernment is to try to figure out what’s the reason here. That way it becomes not just something that you’ve heard from somebody else, but it’s your own use of your own ingenuity. When you use your own ingenuity that way, then you remember it a lot more strongly. So there’s learning what right view is, and there’s strengthening your mindfulness. And then just strengthening your resolve. This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration, is to give the mind a sense of being nourished here in the present moment. So that whatever difficult things come up, you’re not shaken by them, because you’ve got an independent source of well-being. That way you can take yourself out of conflicts. Instead of seeing the conflict as just “me versus them” or “I’ve got to show them a lesson,” whatever that old way of thinking might be, you want to learn to look at it from a new perspective. And having right view and having the strength of concentration, the nourishment of concentration, helps a lot. And part of right view is that aging, illness, and death are normal parts of life. The fact that people do really disagreeable things is a normal part of life. That passage where the Buddha says a way to overcome hatred for someone is, “This person has harmed me, or is harming me, or will harm me, but what should I expect? This person has harmed people I love, is harming them, will harm them, but what should I expect? This person is helping people that I really intensely dislike, has helped them, is helping, will help them, but what should I expect?” It sounds pretty pessimistic, but it’s a way of making sure that you don’t suffer. And it’s not that there’s no opportunity out there for there to be good human beings. But just remember, you’re on the human level here in the human realm. This sort of thing happens. It’s a normal part. The Buddha’s reflection on speech is that human speech can be either kind or unkind, timely or untimely, true or false, loving or hateful. It’s there to remind you that this is normal. Good speech is normal. Bad speech is normal. It’s not outrageous that somebody has lied. It’s not outrageous that somebody has said something really nasty. This is just a normal part of human speech. People have mouths. They have the right to use them any way they want. So you’ve got to prepare your mind so that whatever they say, you’re not going to be taking that to make yourself suffer more. And when you have a sense of well-being inside, it’s a lot easier, because you’re not hoping to feed on other people’s kind words or gentle words. As John Lee says, other people’s words are like things they’ve spit out. Sometimes they spit out good food, but a lot of times what they spit out is not. But in either case, you don’t want to be feeding on that. You want to feed on the sense of well-being you can develop within. So this is where we have to develop right view, strengthen our mindfulness. And get ourselves nourished with concentration. That way we’re well-armed, well-defended, and we’ve got the strength we need to take on the world. Because the world is not a pretty place. It has its pretty spots, it has its nice people, but you depend on everybody being good to you and every place being fine. You’re in for a lot of disappointment. What you want is an independent source of well-being. So you can see the world and say, “Okay, that’s the way the world is. I’m here. I’ll do my best to help what I can, both inside and outside. But I’ll also do my best so I don’t have to suffer.” And think very carefully about any desire to want to come back. So keep your attention focused right here on what you’re doing right now, because it really makes a difference. And regardless of what happens to the world, at least you’ve got your karma. You’ve got the sphere of influence that you can do some good in, to some extent outside, but primarily inside. After all, your experience of what’s outside comes from intentions you’ve had in the past and intentions you have right now. The past ones you can’t change. But you can do something about your intentions right now, so focus your attention there. Make the effort to make them as skillful as you can. (crickets chirping)

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2014/140922_How_Not_to_Suffer.mp3>