No Need to Suffer

November 23, 2016

It’s very ironic that Buddhism is often accused of being pessimistic, because one of its first teachings is that there is a path of practice that leads to the end of suffering. How optimistic can you get? As the Buddha points out, the way we experience things is not just passive. In other words, we’re not simply on the receiving end of things. Our minds play a role in how we experience the world around us, the world inside us, both the world of our body and the world of our mind. And the problem is that we’re doing it unskillfully. We shape these things unskillfully. But the hope lies in the fact that we can learn how to shape them in a skillful way. If you’re sitting or meditating with the breath, there are lots of things you can do with the breath right now. You can give yourself headaches, you can give yourself backaches, or you can find a place for the mind to settle down. So you’re not just on the receiving end. You’re actually shaping things through your intentions. And there’s a primary role with your perceptions, how you label things right now. It depends on the different sensations in the body. Here in the West, we don’t have much of a vocabulary to describe how the body feels from within. But in the East, they have a much more extensive vocabulary. And part of the vocabulary has to do with the elements, or the properties of warmth, fire, water, wind, and earth. But think of them as just basic properties of the way you sense the body. You feel the warmth, the coolness, the movement, the solidity. If you didn’t feel these things, you wouldn’t sense the body at all. This is how the body feels from within. So what are you going to do with that wind element, the movement, the breath? Because that, of the various elements, is the one that you have the most direct control over. You can change the way you breathe. You can breathe in a way that makes you more lightheaded, or breathe in a way that makes you feel more solid. And then as an exercise, you can play with that possibility. It’s like getting a new stereo and playing with the dials. See how loud you can make it, see how heavy the bass or how shrill the treble. And then you realize you don’t like a really heavy bass or a shrill treble, and then you adjust things down to what feels just right. So you can think of cool breathing, you can think of warm breathing. Breathing that feels more solid, breathing that feels more energetic. Just in the sense of the form of the body, there’s a lot to play with. As for feelings, feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain, there are potentials for these things in all parts of the body. So where’s the potential for pleasure right now? Where does the breath feel like it’s flowing smoothly? There’s not too much tension, there’s not too much pressure. Things feel just right. Sometimes “just right” is hard to find because it’s so nondescript. It’s like looking at the air in the room. Very few people actually look at the air. They look through it to something else. But try to notice, where are the nice sensations in the body? And see if you can protect them as you breathe in, breathe out, so that when you breathe in you’re not disturbing them, and when you breathe out you’re not disturbing them. And you feel like you’ve got this little bowl of water that’s still right there in your body, and you’re protecting it so that it doesn’t have any waves and it doesn’t spill. And see how long you can keep that going. Again, that’s an exercise in showing yourself how much you do shape things, even more so with perceptions in and of themselves. Look at how you look at your perceptions. Do you believe them all the time or do you decide, “Well, I’m going to choose to change the perception. I’ve got something. If there’s a pain in the body, what’s the difference between labeling it as a big pain or labeling it simply as a sensation? What’s the difference between labeling your sense of yourself as being in the pain or being outside of the pain? Where are you in the body? Most of us tend to be located someplace right behind the eyes. At least, that’s our sense of where we are. But see if you can locate your center of awareness someplace else. See what that does. As for thought constructs, you can think all kinds of things. Part of the mind is just churning things out, churning things out. And we pick up on some of these things and decide whether they’re worth following or whether they need to be straightened out first. But you can decide for the time being that whatever chatter is going on in the mind, you’re going to be listening only to the chatter about the breath. The conversation about the breath, the questions you ask, the ideas you have about improving the breath. As for the other background, try to relieve it in the background. And finally, there’s consciousness. Where are you focusing it? Can you change the focus? All of these things are things that we have some control over. And this is where the hope lies, that we can learn how to do these things more skillfully. This is what the path is all about, giving you suggestions on how to shape your experience more skillfully, so you don’t have to create unnecessary suffering for yourself. Of course, there is a sense of responsibility that goes with this, but that’s what hope is all about. You’re responsible for things so you can make a difference. Some people would rather be told,”Well, there’s nothing they can do. They’re just passive recipients of things.” Which lets them off the hook as far as responsibility goes, but then it doesn’t open any opportunity for an end of suffering at all. At their very best, all you can do is just be passive and accepting and equanimous. But that’s extremely pessimistic if that were the only option. The fact is that we do shape things. And as we meditate, we gain some hands-on experience in, one, noticing how we do shape things, and two, getting some sense of how we can do it better. And then we can start thinking about applying the same principles to the rest of our lives. Your relationships with other people, your relationship to your work, your relationship to your free time. What are skillful things to do with these potentials, with these relationships? You think about life, heading beyond into the future. What’s lying in wait? Well, there’s aging, illness, and death. What’s the best way to prepare for that? Well, learn how to change the way you shape your sense of the body, the way you change your feelings, your perceptions, your thought constructs, where you focus your consciousness. These are the skills that are going to hold you in good stead. When you learn how to shape these things properly, they become the path to the end of suffering. So that even though there is aging, you don’t have to suffer from aging. There’s illness, you don’t have to suffer from illness. There’s death, you don’t have to suffer from death. There’s separation, you don’t have to suffer from separation. It’s all in the way you talk to yourself and think to yourself. The way you shape these things as the raw material comes in from your past karma. Now being here, human beings, we’ve all got a mix of karma, good and bad. But just because we have some bad karma in the past doesn’t mean we have to suffer. That’s the other hopeful aspect of the path. It’s that we’re not condemned to have to suffer because of something we did in the past. We may have bad effects from those past actions, but we don’t have to suffer from those bad effects. We can learn how to relate to them in a different way. We develop the qualities of mind. The virtue, the discernment, the basic attitude of goodwill for all, and gaining some sense over how the way we relate to pleasures and pains is a skill that can be mastered. So when pleasure comes up, you’re not overcome by it. Because if you tend to be overcome by pleasure, then you’re very likely to be overcome by pain. When pleasure comes up, you know how to use it. As you’re sitting here meditating, you learn how to move the pleasure around. You’re not just sitting there wallowing in it. You say, “Go here, go there, spread here, spread there.” You appreciate the pleasure, but you’re not sucked into it because you realize that the sense of pleasure that comes from being with the breath comes from being with the breath. And if you leave the breath to wallow in the pleasure, that’s the end of it. Things blur out and then you’re lost. But if you stick with the breath, you can be with the pleasure and not overcome by it. Then you begin to realize you can apply the same principle to pain. The pain can be there, but you don’t have to go gobbling it down. It’s one spot, you’re another spot. And your perceptions around the pain can be manipulated so you don’t have to suffer from it. One I found useful is that when there’s a constant pain, ask yourself, “Is it really constant? Does it have its little flare-ups and dying-down moments?” And you begin to notice, “Yeah, they come and they go, they come and they go.” And as they’re coming, ask yourself, “Are they coming at you or are they going away from you?” Think of yourself being in the backseat of one of those old station wagons with the seat facing back. As soon as something presents itself into your range of vision, it’s going away from you. Think of the pain going away from you instead of coming at you. Remember that it’s totally impersonal, that it’s not there to make you suffer. It’s just there. And learn how to see it as a sensation. Learn how not to be afraid of it. When you change your perceptions, the level of suffering can either go up or down. Which level do you want it at? Do you want it to go up or do you want it to go down? Because then you find you’re a lot less afraid of pain, and it’s going to drive you around less. When there’s less fear of pain, there’s less sense of fear. When there’s less fear, the less you can be manipulated by other people, the less you can be manipulated by your own greed, aversion, and delusion. So a lot of problems can be solved by looking at how you shape things. And realizing that you can shape them better. So this is a very hopeful message that the Buddha has, that you are responsible for some of your sufferings, but you don’t have to be. And you can learn the skills that get you past them. Because it turns out that the sufferings that you create for yourself through your lack of skill, those are the only ones that really weigh down the mind. The other unpleasant things that happen in the world can’t touch the mind if you approach them in a skillful way. So this places some responsibility on your shoulders, but it also offers some hope for your heart. Lots of hope. Huge amounts of hope. There’s nothing more hopeful than the fact that there is a path to the end of suffering. And it’s something we can all follow.

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