Strategy

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The Buddha would sometimes compare himself to a doctor. If you look at the Four Noble Truths, it’s like a doctor’s approach to a disease. You look for the symptoms, then you look for the cause, and then you talk about the Bhiksa principle that the disease can be cured by dealing with the cause. And then you give the specific instructions on how to do that. That’s what we’ve got by the Four Noble Truths. Suffering is the symptom. Three forms of craving are the cause. The cessation of suffering comes about by developing dispassion for the cause. And then there’s the Eightfold Noble Path. The Buddha’s quite strategic in how he uses the path. We develop it, but we’re trying to get past all fabrications, and yet the path itself is a fabrication. Which means that at some point, after the path has done most of its work, we have to learn how to deconstruct the path, too. So it’s strategic. Given that the Buddha compared himself to a doctor, it’s interesting to read about the Buddha’s own doctor, as reported in the Canon. He was a very strategic doctor, not only in dealing with medicine, but also in dealing with his patients. There was one case where a man had worms in his brain, and Jivaka, the doctor, was going to have to operate on him. So first he asked the man, “After the operation, can you lie on your back for three months?” The man said, “I’ll do anything.” So Jivaka did the operation, removed the worms, patched him up, and then after a week the man said, “I can’t continue lying on my back anymore. I’m going to die.” Jivaka said, “Hey, you said you could stay for three months.” The man said, “I know I said that, but I’m going to die.” So Jivaka said, “Well, turn over on your right. Can you stay for three months on your right?” The man said, “Yes.” Well, after a week, the same scene happened again. The man said he was going to die. So Jivaka had him turn over and lie on his left side. He said, “Can you stay there for three months?” The man said, “Yes.” At the end of the week, the man said he was going to die. Jivaka said, “Okay, now you can get up. If I told you to stay like this for three weeks, you wouldn’t have made it.” So Jivaka didn’t lie to the man, but he did talk to him in a way that made him stay longer than he would have otherwise. This is similar to what started with the Buddha and his brother. His brother, Nanda, had ordained, but he’s getting satisfied. All he could think about was the woman he left behind. So the Buddha took him up to the heavens and showed him what they call dove-footed nymphs up in the heavens. He said, “Compared to these dove-footed nymphs, what do you think of the woman you left behind?” Nanda said, “She’s like a cauterized monkey with his ears and nose cut off.” So the Buddha said, “Okay, if you stay as a monk, I promise you these nymphs.” So Nanda went back and he became an artist, a meditator. A word got out among the monks that Nanda was meditating for nymphs. They made fun of him. “Oh, you’ve been bribed by the Buddha. You’re a hireling. Your wage isn’t going to be the nymphs.” Nanda got embarrassed. So he went off and practiced more seriously. He finally became an arahant and then told the Buddha he was no longer obliged to give him the nymphs. It’s in both cases. Just like Jivaka, the Buddha was thinking strategically. And so it’s good, as we practice, to learn how to think strategically as well. Because after our defilements, the big ones create aversion and delusion, or passion, aversion, and delusion. And all the minor ones, all the uncomfortable mind states that we can create, they are sneaky. They move in. They take over your breath. And then they claim, “This is how you really feel, so you’ve got to give in to me.” So you have to have your strategies as well. And John Lee has a nice strategy. He says, “Think of the thoughts coming through your head as not necessarily your thoughts. There are little worms going through your blood system. And as the worms go through your brain, they may be dropping off a few thoughts. And all the other germs and who knows what spirits are hanging around. Drop a few thoughts in your head.” Which means you don’t have to side with everything you think. You don’t have to identify those thoughts as your thoughts. At the same time, you can learn how to reclaim your breath. Even though anger may be talking with a really loud voice in your mind, you can continue to breathe in a calm way. The same with lust, the same with fear. You can calm your breathing down, reclaim your breath. And you’ll find that the issues in the mind are a lot easier to deal with when they haven’t moved into the body. So this is one of the reasons why it’s good not only to learn how to get in touch with the breath energy in the body while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, but also as you go through the day. Know that difficult emotions may come up very easily at any time. So you’ve got to be prepared. It’s like going into battle. The enemy doesn’t announce when it’s going to come and attack, so you have to be prepared all the time. Fortunately, here, being prepared doesn’t mean that you have to sit up and spend sleepless nights in watch posts. You can stay with the breath and make it comfortable. You have that right. Nobody can take it away from you. You can breathe comfortably. As you’re working, as you’re driving, whatever you’re doing. So as soon as something comes up in the mind, one, you’ll know because there’ll be a slight change in the breath. And two, you’ll be coming from a position of comfort, a position of strength. So you’ll see less of a need to give in to whatever the unskillful mind-state is promising as its little pleasure. Because there is a pleasure in thinking passionately. There’s a pleasure in thinking angry thoughts. There’s a pleasure in thinking greedy thoughts. Even fear has its reasons. So you have to have something better to hold on to so you don’t give in so easily. This way, as you go through the day, you’re thinking strategically. After all, right effort is not just being with whatever comes up. It means, if something unskillful has arisen, you try to get rid of it, but also you try to make sure it doesn’t come. And one of the ways of making sure it doesn’t come is finding something skillful to block it so you’re not left defenseless in front of it, you’re not exposed to it. This way, even though your defilements may have their tricks, you can help them. And remember, the Buddha set the example in the way he taught specific people and the way he taught in general. The eightfold path is a strategy. The teachings on inconstancy, stress, and non-self are strategies too. Even his portrait of the world. That was strategic. It’s part of right view, that there’s a world in which actions have their good and their bad results based on the quality of the action. Rebirth does happen, and there are other levels. When you learn how to inhabit that world in your mind, you find you have a lot more motivation to practice. And as it turns out, as the practice progresses, you start deconstructing all views about the world. But you take the Buddha’s worldview on as a hypothesis, a working hypothesis, to help remind you that it is possible, through action, to shape your life in the direction you want. And it’s desirable to follow the path. Because if we don’t, we stay in this world in which there’s just repeated suffering again and again and again. That chant just now, “There’s no one in charge, the world offers no shelter, has no protector.” There’s nobody up there saying, “The world has to serve this particular purpose, so your suffering has meaning as it serves this purpose.” Suffering is meaningless. So it’s good to have a worldview in which suffering is meaningless. So we’re more and more motivated to want to get out. At the same time, because the world is created through the actions of the mind, it focuses on the area where the real problem is, i.e., the mind that needs to be trained. Even the Buddha’s worldview is a strategy. All his teachings are strategies. After all, he’s a doctor. He’s got an aim to help us learn how to put an end to our mental illnesses. And the Eightfold Path is one of his techniques, or one of his strategies, for accomplishing that aim.

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