The Buddha’s Tools

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Sometimes we tend to forget the extent to which the Buddha was not a creature of his times. People would come with questions that he wouldn’t answer. The hot topics of the day, he wouldn’t take a stance. He asked different questions, had different answers, because his purpose was different. He’d attained awakening, he’d found a deathless happiness. He saw the most important thing that he could do for the rest of his life was to teach other people how to do that too. So whatever he taught came from his awakening, with the purpose of awakening you. So when you look at his ways of looking at the mind, his ways of looking at the world, it’s not that we’re trying to impose foreign ideas on our minds. We’re trying to familiarize ourselves with the tools that need laid out for solving the big problems in our mind. And one of those tools is making sure that we have a good understanding of what the real problem is. Because we can live with our sense of our lives, and the world outside, and how our minds work, based on what we’ve picked up from our culture. It can really skew our attention. We’re trying to solve the wrong problems with the wrong tools. Sometimes you hear the demand that Buddhism has to adapt itself to the Western worldview. Well, the Western worldview is a problem. In fact, it’s part of the problem in our minds. Something we’ve got to learn how to get past. This doesn’t mean that the Indian worldview that the Buddha grew up with is any better. He took issue with that as well. So when we’re meditating, it’s not just a matter of learning a technique, it’s learning to think about those other aspects of the Buddhist teachings that give us the context for exactly what we’re doing. What our story is, what the world is, how our minds work. And from that perspective, then we can look at our thoughts, look at the shape of our mind in a much more productive way. For instance, the story of your life. If your life begins with your birth this time around, all the back and forth you’ve had with your family, your friends, with the world at large, will be one story. And the implications will go in one direction. But if you look at it in terms of this is just one chapter in a much longer story, that changes the meaning of a lot of things that have happened. It changes the sense of exactly what happened and why. If you can see things in terms of karma and past lifetimes, it makes it a lot easier to let go a lot of the issues that you just grab hold of, especially times when you feel you were treated unjustly. They don’t have such a hold on the mind anymore. And the arc of the story of your coming here to meditate changes. You’re not looking back on a long, long series of lifetimes. They keep coming back to suffering and more suffering and more suffering. And it’s not a case of laying the blame on anybody, because there’s a lot of blame in one lifetime stories. But when there are thousands of lifetimes, many, many thousands of lifetimes, the whole question of who harmed whom and who was most outrageous in their harm loses meaning. What meaning comes out is, do you really want to continue that? So it becomes a lot easier to let go a lot of conflicts you’ve had and turn around and look inside. As the Buddha said, you look inside, you see there’s an arrow in your heart. And it’s to pull out that arrow that we hear. But here again, you look inside the mind. And a lot of us come with a lot of baggage. We talk about the baggage that Buddhism brings from the Asian world. We have our cultural baggage as well. The way Western psychology looks at the mind. It’s teachings about the ego, whether the ego is a good thing, a bad thing. A dramatic thing. The ego has a lot of drama. But the Buddha has you analyze your mind in different ways, aggregates. Form, feeling, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness. And that kind of analysis has a lot less friction to it. Again, a lot less blame. If we have the bad ego or the poor, struggling ego, that frames the issues in one way. If we say, well, there’s a feeling and there’s a perception and there’s a way of fabricating thoughts, it helps to pull us out of those things, out of that drama. So you can step back. Step back from a lot of the things that have been causing trouble. You realize that you’ve been asking the wrong questions and trying to find the wrong answers. There’s a statement by the author of Gravity’s Rainbow, I’ve forgotten his name now. He said if they can get you to ask the wrong questions, it doesn’t matter what answers you come up with. Your mind has been asking the wrong questions about itself. Here the Buddha’s giving you a new vocabulary. A new set of tools for taking things apart. And a new strategy. Instead of trying to get you in touch with your emotions, he’s basically saying, you’ve got to learn how to step back from them. In fact, in stepping back from them, you see them more clearly. So this is why his strategy, based on right mindfulness, getting into right concentration, allows you to see the mind a lot more clearly. And again, in the terms that he recommends. Because when you’re getting the mind into concentration, you find that you’re dealing with form. The form of the body, of the breath. Feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. Your perceptions, the images you hold in mind, as you try to get the mind to settle down. One way of perceiving the breath, or imaging the breath to yourself, is the most effective. One way of talking to yourself about what’s going on. And looking at you in a conversation in terms of directed thought and evaluation. How many times have you had a thought in your mind that’s been driving you crazy? You’ve actually stepped back and said, okay, which part is the directed thought and which part is the evaluation? It’s pretty rare. But it’s a useful tool. You realize you’ve chosen a topic to think about and then you’re making these comments. And what was that choice of topic based on? And what are the comments based on? All this is designed to help you to get a sense of being separate. This is what seclusion is in its innermost meaning. We’re talking about physical seclusion, getting away from other people. Mental seclusion. When you step back from the events of your mind and see them simply as events of this sort. And the analysis is neutral. Instead of the ego with all of its issues, you’ve got directed thought and evaluation. Then there’s your consciousness of all these things. So when you’re getting the mind in concentration, you’re both getting it settled down in a state of well-being. You can look at these thoughts without feeling so threatened by them. And it gives you hands-on experience with the terms of analysis that the Buddha wants you to use. So think of the Buddha’s teachings not as something exotic, but as tools. Tools for stepping back from your thoughts and your emotions. The Buddha is not trying to get you in touch with your emotions. From his point of view, your emotions have your fingerprints all over them. He’s trying to give you the right tools for stepping back from the narratives of your life. He gives you a new narrative framework. From the analysis of your mind, he gives you a new framework for analyzing events in the mind that are conducive to freedom. And he saw this because he had been able to step out of his cultural conditioning. After all, he experienced the unfabricated, which means that all the perceptions and thought constructs and things that usually would condition his six senses fell away. So the knowledge he gained was not conditioned by those things. Both his knowledge of nibbana and his knowledge of how you get there. So there’s an objective quality to his teachings that it’s hard to find anywhere else. So try to use them as tools so you can get more objective about what’s going on in your mind. So you can see what the problem is, what the real problem is. And a lot of times seeing the real problem gives you a clue to the solution right there.

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