The Buddha’s Good News

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We sometimes hear the Buddha being criticized as being pessimistic. After all, the Four Noble Truths focus on suffering. You look at his worldview, there are a lot of hells. The possibility of falling to the realm of the animals, hungry ghosts, is a possibility. But then you look at the people who listened to the Buddhist teachings when he was alive, and you found it to be good news. And the good news was that there are things you can do to avoid suffering. After all, the Four Noble Truths don’t just stop with the First Noble Truth. There are four of them. It explains the cause of suffering. It says that it is possible to put an end to suffering, and it lays out the path. And the path to the end of suffering is not just to a sort of gray oatmeal kind of place. It is the ultimate happiness, total happiness, a state of consciousness that is true, blissful, excellent thing there is. Because you think about how the Buddha arranged his teachings. You look at yourself, and you see that yourself, you’re torn between many different desires. There’s the desire to practice, the desire not to practice, the desire for immediate gratification, the desire for long-term happiness. There are lots of different ways that you could sort through those desires. A very common one, especially what we see in modern psychology, is to say that, well, you have to put up with the fact that there’s going to be conflict. Your idea is what you should do if you want to be respected by other people. And there are things you want to do that may not be so respectful. That’s going to be a constant battle. That’s one approach. You have to get over your neuroses and then put up with the ordinary miseries of being a human being. That’s a pretty depressing thing. That’s pessimistic. Then there are people who notice that for every desire you have a different sense of who you are. So the solution must be to figure out who you are, really, beneath all those different senses. And then from there, decide what you should be desiring. But how much agreement do you find in the world about ideas about who you are? Are you the product of some creator god? Are you the result of different social forces? As the Buddha pointed out, if you’re trying to define yourself, you limit yourself. If you say you’re just an animal being that happens to have some consciousness, what can that kind of being know? What kind of happiness can that being find? Not much. As one Buddhist scholar said to me one time, “We are conditioned beings, so how can we know anything unconditioned?” So it’s a question of who you are, what you are, and then figuring out what you can know, what you should try to desire. It’s all pretty limited. Then there are people who say, “Well, the Buddha taught us that there’s nobody there anyhow, so you’re a nothing. That’s even worse. What can a nothing do?” But that wasn’t the Buddha’s approach at all. Instead of starting with where you are, he started with what would be the best thing to desire. Total happiness. Secure. Unchanging. Harmless. And then to figure out, is there a way to go there? And whatever sense he might have had of himself prior to setting his sights on that goal, he learned that he had to deal with all these different selves inside. Decide which ones to keep. That’s part of the path. And which ones to put away. And trying out different paths to that goal. He came up with different answers, but he finally found a path that worked. And from that overarching desire, that determination to find the ultimate truth, the ultimate happiness, he came up with different ideas of what kind of self would be useful along that path in a provisional way. The sense that you are competent to do this is really important. You see this in many of his teachings. There are a lot of people in his time who felt that they were totally incapable. There’s that story of the outcast, who the Buddha saw had potential. The outcast is walking along the street and he sees the Buddha coming to him. So he tries to get out of the way. And the Buddha gets closer. And he pushes himself more and more into the wall to make himself as small as possible. It gives you an idea of how miserable the life of the outcast was in those days. Then he finally realizes the Buddha wants to talk to him. And so the Buddha teaches him, and he becomes a noble disciple. So the Buddha looked for that ability to encourage people. You can do this. As he said, if it were impossible to abandon unskillful qualities, he wouldn’t have taught it. If it were impossible to develop skillful qualities, he wouldn’t have taught that. But it’s because it’s possible, and because it’s for your good, that’s why he taught it. His concern as a teacher always was to give people the confidence that they can do this. As he said, when you listen to a Dharma talk, be careful that you don’t despise the speaker. You don’t despise the Dharma. And you don’t despise yourself. If you despise yourself, you just let the talk go past. Say, “Well, this is not for me. It’s for somebody else.” But you think about the people the Buddha taught. Sometimes he taught hired killers, the people who had been hired to kill him, and then to kill the people who had killed him, and then the people who had killed those people. He’s able to teach them. He taught Angulimala, the bandit who had killed lots of people, to the point where the king was afraid of him. So that’s an important part of the self that you’re going to need to practice, that you feel that you’re competent to do this, and that you will enjoy the results. As the Buddha said, if you think there’s any trace of suffering or disappointment at all in the Buddha, that’s wrong view. That’s his guarantee that this is going to be really good. Think of that deal that he proposed. If you can make the deal that someone would spear you with spears every morning, a hundred spears in the morning, a hundred spears at noon, a hundred spears in the evening, for a hundred years, and then to be guaranteed at the end stream entry, he said it’d be a good deal. It’d be worth your while to take it up. And when stream entry came, you wouldn’t believe that you had gained it through pain. The experience would obliterate all sense of the pain that you’d gone through. So yes, you will enjoy this. And finally, you have the ability to learn from your own actions, because this is going to be a self-training. The Buddha gives you instructions. Many times those instructions are like riddles. Breathe in and out aware of the whole body. How do you do that? How do you relate to your whole body? Most of us focus on one part of the body at a time. And it takes training to be aware of the whole body. And to allow a sense of ease to spread through the whole body. He gives you ideas of what’s possible, but it’s going to be up to you to figure out how you do that. But he gives you also the example. He’s been able to do it himself. He’s taught other people to do it. So you can use your ingenuity and figure out for yourself that there must be some way of doing this. It’s like reverse engineering. The contraption that you get. You figure out, “Well, how did they make this?” Then you take it apart. And just the fact that you realize somebody has done this should give you the confidence, “Yes, I can do this too.” Because what the Buddha wants you to do is not just accept what he taught, but to develop your own sensitivity. Sensitivity to what you’re doing. Sensitivity to the results. Being sensitive to any disturbance, any stress, any suffering that would come in the results. And that’s how he’s able to get beyond, say, the first jhana, and go into the higher levels of concentration. And then to get beyond the levels of concentration itself, through developing his own sensitivities. So you might say that the training is a sensitivity training. But it’s not being just sensitive to what you happen to feel. It’s being sensitive to what your emotions tell you. Learning to be sensitive to what you’re doing and the connection between what you’re doing and the level of ease or pain, suffering or pleasure that you may feel as a result of what you’re doing. And learning how to see the connections. That’s the kind of sensitivity you’re trying to develop. So for the sake of the path, for the sake of the goal, these are the different selves that you take on. Now you may say, “Oh, I have some other selves that I’m really protective of. The ones that want to be lazy, the ones that don’t want to do any work.” But why do you want to be protective of those? What have they given you? The potentials for strong, confident selves inside. They’re there. Give them some air. Give them some opportunity to show themselves. So this is what’s special about the Buddha’s approach. Instead of trying to find out who your unitary self is, and then from there decide how you should unify your desires, basically says, “What could be the most outstanding thing to desire? What could be the best thing to desire?” And then use your various ways of constructing a sense of self to help bring that desire about, help to attain the goal. The Buddha wasn’t the sort of person who started with first principles. He started with a goal. Everything in his teachings makes sense in relationship to that goal. And it’s a goal that you can attain. That’s the good news. This is why the teaching is not pessimistic at all, and why the people in the time of the Buddha saw this as good news as well.

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