How to Shape the Present Moment

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The Buddha’s first teaching was the Four Noble Truths, the truths about suffering. And when people hear this, they think, well, the Buddha is simply saying, “Life is suffering. It’s miserable.” But that’s not what he’s saying. He wants you to know what the suffering is, what causes it, so that you can put an end to it by putting an end to the cause. So the message of the Four Noble Truths is that suffering is something that we can gain freedom from. The big issue is, well, why do we suffer? A lot of people say, “Oh, it’s because of the economy. It’s because of other people. It’s because of climate change.” But the Buddha says you’re looking outside, and that’s the wrong place. You have to look inside. He gives a long list of the causes, and the most basic one is that we shape our experience in ignorance. In other words, we have the potentials for the present moment coming in from our past actions. But our present actions are the ones that actually shape that experience into an experience. That’s what we have to look into, because we tend to do that shaping in ignorance, because we don’t understand why we make ourselves suffer. But if we understand what the problems are, then we can begin to shape our experience in a new way, so that it becomes part of the path to the end of suffering. There are three ways that we shape our experience, bodily, verbally, mentally. Bodily, it’s through the way we breathe. Verbally, it’s the way we talk to ourselves. The Buddha calls this directed thought and evaluation. And by that he means that you direct your thoughts to a topic, and then you make comments on it. Is this good? Is this bad? If it’s bad, what can be done to make it good? If it’s already good, what can be done to make it better, or at the very least to keep it going? And what use can you get out of it? You ask questions, you try to pose answers. That’s verbal fabrication. And then there’s mental fabrication, the perceptions we hold in mind, the images we hold in mind. And then the feelings, we focus on feelings of pain, pleasure, neither pleasure nor pain. Now when we do these things in ignorance, we can take some of that raw material from the past and make ourselves suffer from it, even if it’s good raw material. So you get angry about something. You start breathing in a way that makes it uncomfortable just to be here in the present moment, to be in the body. You can talk to yourself in all kinds of ways that stoke the anger, make it worse. You focus on the things that get you irritated. Then you can come up with all kinds of comments, true or false. And then as for the perceptions, you can hold an image in mind, say the person that you’re angry at has done something that you don’t like. We tie that together with other things that that person has done that you don’t like, or other people have done that you don’t like, so you feel that it’s too much to ask of you to behave in a skillful way. So you have the right to throw a tantrum, to get angry. That’s one way that we can create misery out of the present moment. Another way is when things happen that we just simply don’t want to happen, like someone who’s near and dear to us passes away. All you can think about is how much you’ve lost someone who’s valuable to you. That’s what you talk about. Those are the perceptions you hold in mind. Because we do this in ignorance, we can create a lot of suffering. But what the Buddha’s teaching us is new ways to fabricate. In fact, you might say that his whole range of teachings is meant to teach us how to breathe in new ways, how to talk to ourselves in new ways, new perceptions to hold in mind, new feelings to focus on. Which is why it’s important to develop a quality called mindfulness, so we can keep the Buddhist teachings in mind, even though we haven’t seen for ourselves yet that they’re true. But if you’re convinced that they seem to be true, and they could be useful, all he asks is that you give them a try. See how much benefit you can get from them. But if you forget them, then it’s as if they didn’t happen. This is why he lists mindfulness in so many of his lists of important qualities to develop in the mind. Mindfulness is something you want to train. Like right now we’re focusing on the breath. That’s bodily fabrication. And the Buddha gives instructions on how to do this. He says try to be sensitive to when the breath is long, when it’s short. When you do that, you begin to notice what kind of breathing feels good for the body. Then he says to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. And when you have that whole body awareness, then you allow the breath to calm down. Learn how to breathe in ways that give rise to a sense of refreshment. Breathe in ways that give rise to a sense of pleasure. And you look into the perceptions that you have in mind as you focus on the breath. When you breathe in, what’s happening? For a lot of us we think well the breath is the air that flows in and out of the nose, so the breath comes from outside. But when the Buddha talks about the in-and-out breath, he says it’s actually a quality of the body in and of itself. It’s part of what he calls the wind element inside. So the breath actually originates inside. So ask yourself where does it feel that the breath is originating? Is there any one point or are there several points all at once? Try on different perceptions to see what helps. So you’re getting exercise here not only in new ways of doing bodily fabrication, but new ways of talking to yourself, verbal fabrication, new perceptions, mental fabrication. And you can create feelings of well-being simply by simply by the way you breathe. So you’re getting exercise in all those forms of fabrication. And then as you go through your daily life you want to be able to keep those in mind. Because it’s not the case that breathing nicely is good for you only when you sit here with your eyes closed. You can do it any time during the day. And if you get some control over the way you talk to yourself, you can prevent yourself from creating a lot of suffering. And you’ve also learned that you can replace one perception of what’s going on with another perception that’s equally true, or maybe even more true, and more beneficial. So you have the freedom to make these changes. Then when an incident comes up that would normally give rise to grief or give rise to anger, you can remember what the Buddha taught. Breathe in a different way. Breathe in a way that doesn’t aggravate the grief. Talk to yourself in a way that doesn’t aggravate the grief, like the Buddha has you think about it. The fact that this is not the only lifetime you’ve been here. There have been many lifetimes and you’ve lost many people in the course of those lifetimes. Think about that when you drive up Interstate 5 next to the next to the ocean. You look out over the ocean. It’s a big ocean and you can see only a tiny portion of it. And yet the Buddha says you’ve shed more tears than there is in those oceans. That puts your current loss into perspective. And then he has you remind yourself that a lot of our sense of grief is basically a concern for ourselves. We say we grieve over that person, we miss that person. But a lot of it is our own sense of “I’m lost without that person. I’m missing something without that person.” You want to remind yourself that the things that you can do for yourself, the good you can do for yourself, is more than any person can do for you. It’s one of the verses in the Dhammapada that the people who love you the most can do for you. Those things are nothing compared to the good that a well-trained mind can do for you. So you think about these things. Hold them in mind. Change your perceptions about what your situation is. And you find that you’re not suffering. As much as you would have otherwise. So you want to be able to keep these points in mind when the Buddha teaches you. It’s not just something nice to listen to on a Sunday morning or during an evening meditation. These are ways for you to think all the time. It’s good to think. If the Buddha were watching your mind right now, what kind of advice would he give? About how to think, how not to think, what perceptions to hold in mind, which ones not to. That issue of perceptions explains, or helps to explain, why there are so many analogies and similes in the Pali Canon. Giving more skillful ways of looking at a situation. This is why we take the Buddha as our refuge, the word for refuge. Saranap also means something you keep in mind. In this case you keep the Buddha in mind, you keep his dharma in mind, you keep the Sangha in mind. Using what? Using your mindfulness. So train your mindfulness to be strong so it’s not knocked off by the strength of your emotions. We get some practice here as we meditate. You’re focused on the breath. All of a sudden you find yourself thinking about something far away. Mongolia. Then you come back. Then you find yourself thinking about Quebec. You ask yourself, what’s going on here? The mind is just wandering around. It’s important that you catch yourself though. The more quickly you can catch yourself, the stronger your mindfulness is going to be. And as it gets stronger in a quiet place like this, then it’s more likely to be able to help you when raw emotions come welling up inside your heart, inside your mind. So you can keep the Buddha’s instructions in mind. How to breathe, how to talk to yourself, what images to hold in mind, what feelings to focus on. And you find situations that you would have thought you couldn’t bear are actually very bearable. And you can bear them without feeling weighed down. Because that’s the Buddha’s gift. He didn’t say that by practicing the Dhamma we’re not going to be meeting with loss in life. We’re not going to be meeting up with bad things in life. He himself had to suffer disease. He himself had people who wanted to kill him. His skill that he offers to us is the skill of how not to suffer. In the face of really bad things coming up. The world may be a bad place. It has its ups and downs. But your mind doesn’t have to go up and down with the world. It can be steady and solid with a sense of strong well-being inside. That’s the skill he teaches. And when we remember that skill and can put it to use, that’s when we’re actually taking refuge in the Buddha and the Dhamma and the Sangha. And it’s in that way that we keep ourselves safe.

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