The Buddha’s Buffet

November 21, 2023

The Buddhist teachings are like a buffet. Lots of choices. If you want to go all the way to the end of suffering, that’s on the buffet table. If you want to hang around for a while, he has some teachings for how you can minimize the amount of suffering. This process of samsara, which is driven by craving and clinging, has its pleasures, as the Buddha said. That’s one of the reasons why we keep going for things. And if you see that you don’t want to keep on going like that, he points you to understanding the four noble truths. Understand how you’re suffering, what suffering is. It’s a pretty radical definition, clinging to the five aggregates. He starts out by giving some examples. Aging, illness, death, separation from what you love, having to be with what you don’t like, not getting what you want in terms of… In fact, you don’t want to die, you don’t want to get ill. You don’t want to age. But if you’re born, these things are going to happen. These are all things we know. He says what ties them all together is clinging to the five aggregates. That’s where it gets radical, because we think suffering is something that we’re on the receiving end of. We don’t realize that, one, we do things that cause suffering, and two, the suffering itself is something we do. And the clinging is the suffering. As we mentioned today, it’s not the case that your mind has a hand that holds on to things, but it has certain habits that it keeps returning to again and again. Clinging is like an addiction. Part of you knows that the addiction is bad for you, but there’s another part that can’t resist. And a large part of the problem with addiction is that you can’t imagine not falling for the addiction. It all seems so automatic and even inevitable. So one of the ways of getting beyond this addiction of clinging is to allow yourself to imagine that the mind doesn’t have to do this. The habits that it has, the ways it talks to itself, the ways it perceives the world, the ways it perceives itself, its ideas of what it has to do. It’s clinging to sensual pleasures or even just to the thought of sensuality. You can see the drawbacks, but there also has to be a part of the mind that really does want to get away from them. Otherwise, you’re willing to put up with the drawbacks. So it’s a question of how much you want to continue to suffer. You should go for things you know that are going to cause suffering, but you just can’t give them up. The Buddha doesn’t totally abandon you. He doesn’t say you’re hopeless. He just says you have to learn how to moderate your clinging so that it’s relatively skillful. And be clear-eyed about the fact that, yes, there will be suffering that comes from that modified clinging, that chant that we do frequently. “I’m subject to aging, illness, and death. Separation from all this is dear and appealing to me, and I’m the owner of my actions. Responsible for my actions is what it means, and I oversee the results of those actions.” The Buddha says that’s not just for monks to contemplate. It’s for everybody—man, woman, child, lay, ordained. And the contemplation doesn’t stop there. In the sutta from which that chant comes, the Buddha goes on to say, “You reflect that everywhere, everybody is subject to aging, illness, and death, and separation. And for everybody, they’re the owners of their actions. Whatever they do for good or for evil, to that will they fall heir.” The first reflection, when you reflect simply on yourself, is meant to give rise to hatefulness. You’ve got to be careful about what you do. Don’t do anything that’s going to be harmful. In other words, don’t break the precepts. Don’t get other people to break the precepts. The second contemplation is about the universality of it all. The Buddha says it gives rise to a desire to follow the path. In other words, you realize that wherever you go, no matter how good the circumstances can be, as long as you’re continuing in this habit of samsara—and that’s what it is, this habit. Samsara is not a place, by the way. The Mahayana makes a big deal out of this. You’re in samsara, you want to go to nirvana, which is another place, but you’re abandoning all those people in samsara. Aren’t you cruel and selfish? But the Buddha doesn’t talk about samsara as a place. It’s an activity. It’s a bad habit we have. And kicking a bad habit is not cruel to the other people who are still involved in that habit. You’re showing them that it is possible to stop it. So when you reflect that wherever you might go in this process, there’s going to be more aging, illness, and death, that’s when you finally decide, “Yeah, I’ve got to get out.” Now, how quickly you want to get out, that’s going to be another issue. They talk about stream-enterers who reach the point in their practice where it’s guaranteed that they have no more than seven more lives before they gain total awakening. They can still get complacent. They can tell themselves, “Well, seven more lives, that’s not too bad. It gives me an opportunity to try a few different pleasures.” On the night of his passing away, the Buddha was addressing a group that had nothing but noble disciples, everything from stream-enterers on up to arahants. And the theme of his last admonition was to complete your practice through heedfulness. So it is possible for people who are barely advanced on the path to still get heedless and want to try out a few more lives. So the Buddha does give advice on how to do that without suffering too much. There will be suffering. You have to be clear-eyed about this. You’re going to hang around. You’re going to continue doing these things. There will be suffering. But you can do it in a skillful way. And there’s a thread running through all of his instructions for how to hang around in his virtue. You make sure you don’t break the five precepts. He says, “A husband and wife living together, both of them observing the precepts, it’s as if they both are living with a deva.” As I mentioned this afternoon, there was a case of a couple who came to the Buddha and said that they’ve been faithful to one another ever since they first got married, and they want to see each other again in their future life. The Buddha recommended four qualities they should develop together, and one of them is virtue. The first one, of course, is conviction. Conviction here means conviction in the Buddha’s awakening, that the Buddha really did gain awakening through his efforts, his own efforts, setting an example that this is what’s possible through human effort. Also, there was the content of the awakening, which is the fact of rebirth and the power of karma. You can do good things in this lifetime and go to a good rebirth, but there are also cases where you do good things in this lifetime and your next rebirth is not so good. The reason for that, the Buddha said, is either you have some bad karma from before, or you changed your ways afterwards and started doing bad things, or at the moment of death you adopted a wrong view. What this means is that if you want to continue samsara with a minimum of suffering, you’ve got to be really careful about what you do in your thoughts, words, and deeds. This is why the Buddha said that two of your most valuable possessions are your virtue and your right views. These are your protection. By developing conviction, it explains two of the other factors that the Buddha said can minimize suffering. And if two people develop these two qualities, or all these qualities together, they’re likely to come back in good circumstances, meet each other again. Virtue itself. When you follow the precepts, you realize that you’ve got something really valuable in your precepts, so valuable that if someone offered you, say, a million dollars to lie, you wouldn’t start calculating, “Well, what can I do with a million dollars?” You’d say immediately, “No, I couldn’t do that.” You have a precept that’s worth more than a million dollars. Years back I was listening to a radio interview with a veteran from the Vietnam War who said he’d been haunted by memories of some people he’d killed over there. Every night they’d appear to him. He said, “If I had a million dollars to make this go away, if I could go back and undo what I’d done, I’d be happy to pay that amount of money.” Well, a million dollars can’t buy that. So when you stick with the precepts, you prevent yourself from having to do things that you would later regret to that extent. The third quality the Buddha recommends is generosity. Realize that it’s a trade. By giving any excess wealth away, you develop good qualities in the mind. There’s a more expansive mind, a more generous mind, a more spacious mind, one that really does develop goodwill for others. And as John Lee says, when you’re generous with other people, they’re like your relatives. This is one of the discoveries of anthropology for us. The first book on anthropology was a book on the gift, explaining what a gift is. One of the important things about a gift is that there’s an exchange. You give “x” only when you get some money in return or something else in return. You’re putting up a barrier. But when you give without any requirement for return, you erase barriers. The more generous you are, the fewer barriers you have in your life. As John Lee says, the whole world becomes your home. The fourth quality is related to right view. You develop your discernment, what the Buddha calls this penetrative insight into arising and passing away, conducive to the end of suffering. Even though you’re delaying the time when you’re going to finally go for the ultimate goal, you do have to have some insight into what you’re doing that’s causing suffering, what you’re going to stop. That’s what penetrative means. You’re not just passively watching events coming and going, empty phenomena rolling on, as one person once said. You realize that you’re complicit. And the way you do things, the motivations for your actions, really will make a big difference in the results that come out of these arisings and passings away. This way, when you endure the sufferings that come with this habit of samsara, you can do it with clear eyes and not be surprised. That chant, “We’re subject to aging, illness, and death,” in the Thai translation says, “Aging is normal. Illness is normal. Death is normal.” When you accept the fact that these things are normal and you still enter into relationships, you still maintain a life out in the world. You can start thinking about, “Well, what do I want to accomplish with this relationship, given the fact that it will end?” And you don’t know when. So you want to do things and say things and think things out of goodwill. Learn to teach one another what are the good things in life, what are truly good things in life, what are good values to have. And you can do that with your relationships, even though they will come to an end. At least the end isn’t bitter. If it’s a relationship where you’ve never wished ill to the other person, it’s a lot easier to part. So these are some things to think about. Even though you may not reach the end of suffering in this lifetime, there are ways you can minimize the suffering. You choose on the buffet table. Do your best to choose all the good things, because that’s what the Buddha has to offer us, nothing but good things. But don’t limit yourself beforehand by saying, “Well, I’m not ready to go all the way.” Laypeople in relationships can still attain stream-entry and still maintain their relationships. There’s the example of Lady Vesaka. She gained stream-entry as a young woman and continued having a family life. So aim as high as you can. The less clingy you are, the better. The more clingy you are, the less suffering. There are some areas where you just tell yourself, “I cannot possibly let go.” Make sure they don’t compel you to do anything unskillful. Make sure your clingings aren’t as skillful as you can make them. Those are the ones that you can wear relatively lightly. And those are also the ones that are easier to let go when the time comes. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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