

Doubting the Buddha

September 24, 2005

The Buddha said several times that all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering, or stress and the end of stress. But people tend not to believe him. They want him to teach other things as well. If you look at the history of Buddhist thought, you see people taking his teachings and squeezing them to answer all kinds of questions that have very little to do with suffering and the end of suffering.

This is what happened to the teaching on not-self. This is what happened to the teachings on emptiness and dependent co-arising. These are all very practical teachings that were meant used as part of the training to put an end to suffering, but over time they got turned into something else.

That's why it takes so much time to sort out exactly what the Buddha did teach, and what role these teachings have in that course of training. But we can't blame just the people who came down before us, or came between us and the Buddha. We have our own way of not really wanting to look at that issue. We have other issues. Everybody has other issues.

You sit here meditating, and all of a sudden something else seems a lot more interesting. You get totally involved in a little thought world. Instead of looking at it as an instance of suffering or something to analyze as a way of putting an end to suffering, you enter *into* the thought. Suddenly the issues in the thought become very real, very important.

So it takes a real reorientation to get out of those thought worlds, simply to see them as processes: the mind's habit of fabrication, its way of putting things together. You put feelings and perceptions together, you add a little salt, a little pepper, and you want to eat them. When they don't agree with you, you find other ones. This time you add mayonnaise and mustard, and it still doesn't agree with you, but you keep at it. You keep finding things to feed on. The Buddha says one of our foods for the mind is what he calls mental intention, or intellectual intention: this habit we have of cooking up thoughts, and then trying to feed on, to get some nourishment out of them.

So we have to learn how to step back and look at them, not in terms of their content as in terms their being instances of the process of fabrication. Doing this involves a double process. On the one hand, we have to create a place for the mind to stay, we have to create other food for the mind, so it's not so hungry all the time. This is why we practice mindfulness, why we practice concentration, trying

to give rise to a sense of rapture, a sense of refreshment, simply being with the breath. Rapture and refreshment are things you put together. The causes are simply focusing on one object and evaluating it, looking at it again and again, getting more and more sensitive to how you relate to it.

As when you focus on the breath: Try to be very sensitive to how the breathing feels, figuring out which way of breathing feels right coming in, feels right going out, and then try to maintain that. It's the maintaining that's going to let this very ordinary-feeling breath become more and more refreshing. Try to breathe in a way that doesn't put a squeeze in the body, doesn't force things. Think of the body as having lots of little nooks and crannies in its breath channels. The breath can go all over the place, but it doesn't have to exert pressure on any part of the body.

This way, the mind and the body get a place to rest. The sensations in the body get a chance to rest as well. You're not running roughshod over them, pulling the breath in, pushing the breath out. When the sensations of the body are allowed to stay still, they begin to expand that sense of ease, giving rise to a sense of fullness. You have to be very gentle with that sense of fullness. Again, you can't squeeze it or force it, because if you do, you spoil it. Just *allow* it to spread.

Then you can feed on it. Just allow it to be there. That in and of itself is nourishing. As other thoughts come in, you just brush them aside. Try to stay with the sense of fullness, ease, and stillness, and let the mind soak in that for a while. That's food for the mind. When you have this kind of food for the mind, you're less and less hungry for other thoughts, other types of mental food. And when you're less hungry, then you can look at those thoughts for what they are, simply as processes. This is the second step in the process.

It's like walking past an open-air movie theater. You look up at the screen, you can look at it in one of two ways. You can either look at it in a way to see what the movie is about—who are the characters, what are they doing—and you do your best to get into the movie even you can't hear what's being said. It's amazing how much the mind will invest in a movie even when you can't hear the sound track. Or you can look at it simply as flashes of color on the screen. You don't have to try to make sense out of it at all.

With the first approach, you can actually start getting excited or sad or angry or whatever the emotion the story is supposed to evoke. Or even if you don't know the story, you find yourself evoking an emotion.

The second way helps cut through that. You see the movie simply as patterns of color that don't have to mean anything at all.

It's same with the thoughts in the mind. You can either get involved in them—and even when they don't mean that much, you can give them all kinds of

meaning, and invest all kinds of emotional weight in them—or you can learn to see them simply as these flashes in the mind. They come flashing in, flashing out. We think we're clever because we've learned how to find meaning in the flashes, but also we find a lot of suffering in the flashes. But now, if you're not too eager to feed on them, you can actually look at them as a process. You can take them apart: There are perceptions that put labels on things. And then there are the feelings. Sometimes just a label in and of itself will evoke a particular feeling. Then you start building stories around the labels and the feelings.

And there can be no end to these things. One story may trail off, and you replace it with another one and just keep on going, but it's the same old raw materials: feelings, perceptions, thought constructs. By their nature, these things don't last very long, yet we try to patch them together, build them into all kinds of things, put lots of mortar in them, hoping that they'll stick together. But they don't, because the mortar itself is more perceptions, more thought constructs.

But if you learn how to look at the process like this, it gives you a sense of disenchantment, dispassion. You wonder why you ever thought you could feed on these things. And because you have a better food source now, you don't feel so compelled to go pick up every scrap and chew on it.

So instead of getting involved with the agendas of a particular thought world, you can just see it as an instance of stress, and develop your powers of concentration, mindfulness, and discernment as ways of putting an end to that stress. It can be disorienting, because we put so much meaning and importance into our thoughts. But when you can learn to pull yourself out, then you're in control of the thinking process. It becomes a tool you can use when you need it and something you put aside when you don't.

So it's good to be able to step out and look at your thoughts from that point of view of what the Buddha was teaching: just stress and the ending of stress. Then you find that it starts dissolving away a lot of other things you might have thought were important.

As the Buddha points out, one of our biggest issues is the sense of self that we create around our fabrications, what he calls "I-making" and "my-making." If you look carefully, you can see even that sense of who you are is a construct, and that it involves an awful lot of tension, pain, stress, discontent, and a lot of the other things that you hold dear. Again, if you really look at them as constructs, things you put together, instances of stress, and when you can step back and look at them from the point of view of a mind that's concentrated with a sense of fullness, that really changes your relationship to these activities, these processes. They lose their

allure. You really can free yourself from them. You don't have to be under their power.

So it's good to remember why we're here, what this training is all about. When we do, it helps put everything else in perspective. Keep focused on that one issue. Don't get sidetracked into blind alleys. When you keep in mind the Buddha's question and the topic of his teaching, and you apply that perspective to your experience, you find that experience becomes a very different kind of thing. As the Buddha said, there is this possibility: the possibility of an end to suffering and stress. We have a lot of trouble believing him. Sometimes it's almost as if our imaginations can't get around the idea. But if you follow his teaching, follow his training, it can actually get you there.

So allow that concept to get into your head. Give it some room there, and see what it does. It should rearrange everything.