

Large Perspective, Small Focus

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You've probably heard of the three knowledges that the Buddha gained on the night of his awakening. There was the knowledge of past lives, the knowledge of beings dying and being reborn throughout the universe, and then the knowledge that put an end to his defilements, his *asavas*: fermentations, or effluents in the mind.

One of the points that always struck me as interesting is that in the first knowledge—his knowledge of previous lives—even though he was able to remember huge numbers of previous lives, it didn't confirm the principle of karma. In other words, he didn't see the why or the wherefore: why he would be passing through one life and going to another one. Even though he had many, many lives to observe, the pattern didn't become clear.

It was only in his second knowledge, when he saw all beings in the universe going through this pattern, that he was able to see what the pattern was: that it was connected with their actions; their actions came from their intentions and their views. Only then was he able to focus in on his own mind and figure out what the problem was—what was keeping all of this activity going and creating a lot of suffering—and how to put an end to it.

That's a pattern we can take to heart, too, in our own practice. We don't necessarily have to get those particular knowledges, but it is good to remember that you need to get a larger view of things before you can focus in on your own mind. Otherwise, the narratives of the day, your likes and your dislikes, your successes and your disappointments, loom awfully large. It's hard to understand what's going on and particularly hard to understand what it is that you're doing that's contributing to the suffering. You look at the world and there's a lot of suffering out there, and a lot of things that don't show any intelligent design or certainly no *compassionate* design—and you start thinking about it: If there was some designer behind this, he either did a bad job because he couldn't do anything better or he *intentionally* did a bad job so that there would be a lot to suffer from as we live in the world.

But the Buddha was able to see that the real suffering that weighs down the mind is not what's going on out there in the world, it's what the mind piles on itself in addition. That was his insight: that what was driving everything out there were these forces within the mind. He was able to identify them—certain views and certain intentions. That's why right view and right resolve became the first two factors of the path—you had to straighten out your views, straighten out your resolves or intentions, and you'd be able to clear out this problem of suffering inside.

So when the events of the world get really oppressive, take to heart that passage we chanted just now: There's no one in charge. The question often comes, what is the meaning of life, and the answer is: the meaning you give to it. There's no written-out meaning someplace or no hidden meaning someplace. The Buddha's view of the universe is that it's all pretty pointless. The universe evolves and then it devolves, and then it evolves again and then devolves again, back and forth, back and forth. Beings go around and get born in different places, and sometimes they work, work, work hard at developing skillful qualities and then they reap the benefits of those qualities and they tend to get complacent.

Or they find suddenly they have power. There was that cartoon in the *New Yorker* once: two Congressmen walking out of the Capitol and one of them is saying, "What good is having power if you don't abuse it?" That's the attitude that a lot of people have and it's very easy for us, standing outside, to look down on that. But the real question is: When you get power, are you going to use it well or not?

The Buddha saw that the best line of action was to get out of this system entirely, and his line of action focused on: What are you doing right now, what are your intentions, and what is your *attention* doing right now? What are you paying attention to? What are your views? When you find yourself suffering from something, the Buddha says to look at it with right view and with right resolve, i.e., look out for wrong views around the suffering, the views that say, "You have to suffer because your suffering serves a particular purpose," or the view that says if you can beat yourself up enough then whoever out there is meting out punishments is going to feel sorry for you—kind of the dog's approach to having misbehaved. You've seen it The dog knows that it shouldn't have done something on the rug. You come into the house and it just lies on its back and looks very abject. But we're human beings. We should realize we've made mistakes, we have to learn how to admit our mistakes, and then realize we've got to work on the qualities of mind so that we don't keep *repeating* those mistakes.

So you look at the suffering, try to identify it, and as the Buddha said, it's just aggregates, which are just activities of the mind—there's form, feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness. And it's not just the aggregates themselves, there's aggregates plus clinging, the way we cling to these things. What are you clinging to? Is it a particular idea about how things should be? Is it a particular idea of who you are or how you should be? Whatever the suffering, just take it apart in terms of those activities, and see where it is you're holding on. Then firm up your intention that you don't want to repeat that.

That's what the rest of the path is all about, to carry through with that intention, to develop the qualities you need, particularly the qualities of

concentration, because a lot of the work we need to do on our minds is painful work, looking at our own mistakes, focusing inside instead of outside. It's so much easier to blame things outside, so much harder to look inside and see "What am I doing right now that's weighing down the mind?" But if the mind is in concentration, then it's in a much better position to do that. One, it's because to get the mind in concentration you have to deal with those forms of fabrication: physical fabrication, i.e., the breath; verbal fabrication, directed thought and evaluation; mental fabrication, which are perceptions and feelings—perceptions are the labels or images you apply to things, and feelings are feelings of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain.

You realize, when you're getting the mind into concentration, that you're working directly with these forms of fabrication, getting hands-on experience in using them well, so that when you go into the rest of your life you can notice, "I'm using these activities and I'm not using them well. That's why I'm suffering. What would be a better way of putting things together?" If a particular emotion comes up, how are you breathing? How are you thinking about it? How are you talking to yourself about that emotion? What are the perceptions you hold around it? Can you change those in a more skillful direction?

This is where the other aspect of concentration comes in and helps: The concentration should give you a sense of strength and well-being—a sense of being centered and not being easily knocked off center. That way, you can really question these things. If you see that there's something unskillful you've been doing and it's something that you like doing—or you find it's easy to do because it's so habitual—the fact that you now have that sense of being grounded with a strong sense of well-being in the concentration makes it a lot easier to let go of those old habits.

So we look out to the world to get a larger picture of things. This is one of the reasons why, before we meditate, we have chants like the ones we did just now—the world is swept away, it does not endure, offers no shelter, there's no one in charge—to reflect on the pointlessness of things out there. Which means that instead of just getting depressed about that, we can make it a point for ourselves that we want to deal with this skillfully.

Then we have the brahmaviharas—as you think about all living beings out to infinity. It's always good to air out your mind, to think in those larger terms several times a day, so that you can put all of this into perspective. After all, you want to find a happiness that doesn't harm anybody. That reflection on equanimity—realizing that happiness has to be based on your actions—keeps bringing you back from everything out there to what you're doing right here right now. I know a lot of people like to stay with that larger picture, but the

larger picture is there just to give you a sense of perspective. The real work is right here.

As I mentioned a while back, I keep getting the question, “Why do you have everybody to focus on their actions? It seems so picayune and minor when all you have to do is open up to the large, vast Oneness all around you.” Well, it turns out that that large, vast Oneness all around you is not the path to awakening, it’s just a perception. It can be a nice one, but it can also get in the way of the practice. If you try to be one with that large Oneness, you’re not paying attention to what you’re doing right now to create a sense of self around a particular idea, a particular fabrication. You don’t see what you’re doing, and as a result you don’t see how you can do it better, or how there’s a more skillful way of finding freedom.

A lot of people don’t like looking at their actions because, after all, they’ve done a lot of unskillful things. Well, just remind yourself, all human beings have been doing unskillful things. If we had no unskillful behavior in our background, we wouldn’t be here, we’d be someplace else.

So we all have habits that we have to learn how to undo, and new habits that we have to learn how to develop. But it’s in exploring the potential we have for choosing freely between different courses of action that we find a different kind of freedom ultimately. It’s a freedom that’s not conditioned.

Now, looking at our past actions and looking even at our present actions is often like looking at a bramble patch. That’s where we want to say, “Forget about that, let’s just go for the larger Oneness.” But it turns out that you have to go through the brambles to get to the nice part inside the bramble patch—those brambles are protecting something. It’s not brambles all the way. But you explore your freedom of choice now and you find that it leads to a path that opens up to a greater freedom—total freedom from suffering.

So, take the large view to get your perspective but then focus in on what you’re doing right now, like the Buddha did on his third knowledge. Because that’s the way out.