

A Handful of Leaves

October 21, 2012

There's a story of how the Buddha was in the forest one day with a group of monks. He picked up a handful of leaves and asked them which was greater, the leaves in his hand or the leaves in the forest. Of course, they said, the leaves in the forest were far more than the leaves in his hand. He went on to say that, in the same way, the things he gained knowledge of in his awakening were like the leaves in the forest. The things he taught were like the leaves in his hand.

What did he teach? He taught the four noble truths: *dukkha*, which can be translated as stress or suffering; its cause; its cessation; and the path to its cessation. The reason why he focused only on this handful of leaves, he said, was because if he talked about the leaves in the forest—all the other things he had learned—it wouldn't help people gain awakening. It wouldn't lead to dispassion; it wouldn't lead to release. But the leaves in his hand would.

A number of people have expressed amazement at this—or concern—that after all the wonderful, amazing things he saw in his awakening, he would have narrowed his teaching down to just these things. It seems to be a very narrow, almost selfish kind of concern for people to try to put an end to their suffering, and to focus on that as the main issue in the practice.

But the Buddha was pointing to something that each of us is responsible for. We can't be responsible for other people's actions, and we can't go out and relieve their suffering. We can help around the edges. But there's a deep core in each person where that person is causing him or herself a lot of suffering. And it's hard to reach into that core. You see it in a child newly born, who's crying and crying and crying. You can't figure out what the problem is. You see it in people who are sick and delirious. You try to reach them, and they're beyond reach. You can see that they're suffering, but you can't do anything about it.

Well, each of us has that inaccessible area within ourselves. We're the only ones who can access our own suffering, and we're the only ones who can do something about it. At the very least, if you can do that, then when you're sick, dying, old, or whatever, you're not going to be a burden on other people. And when you're not weighing yourself down with suffering, there are times when you *do* have the strength to help others to whatever extent you can.

This is why the Buddha focused here. This is a part of each of us that nobody else can sense, and nobody else can directly experience. They can hook you up to machines, read the brain waves, and learn to recognize, from your reporting, that

certain brainwave patterns correspond to your reports of certain forms of suffering. But it depends on your reporting. You're the one who actually experiences it.

You experience the body from within, you experience your mind from within, in a way that nobody else can. And it's in this inner area here that the causes of suffering lie. This is where suffering or stress is experienced. But here is also where the solution can be found. When the Buddha talks about making yourself a refuge, this is where you start: by developing the qualities of the path, which come down to virtue, concentration, and discernment.

Virtue is when you avoid harmful behavior. Concentration is when you get the mind solidly gathered around one object. And that's to give strength to your discernment, to see exactly what you're doing that's causing the suffering and what you can do to stop.

That chant we had just now—"those who don't discern suffering"—may sound strange: Doesn't everyone discern their suffering? But the Buddha said our main duty with regard to suffering and stress is to comprehend it, the implication being that we may feel it, but we don't really comprehend it. We don't understand it because we try to run away. And like the hero in the novel, *The Wizard of Earthsea*: The more we run away, the bigger the shadow following us gets. We have to turn around and face it, something we've been running away from ever since we were little children.

But to face it requires a lot of strength, and that's what the concentration practice is for. It enables us to see that there's an area of the mind that suffers and also an area of the mind that doesn't: an area that can be aware of the suffering but doesn't have to take it on. It's not burdened by it. You need a lot of discernment to see that. The discernment, in turn, requires this concentration we're working on. We're trying to get the mind to be still in the present moment because this is where all the action is. It's in the little movements of the mind, particularly our intentions, which can be affected by craving or clinging, or which can be free from craving and clinging. This is where we try to see them. In fact, this is the only place we really *can* see them in action.

You sit down with the suffering in the same way you would to film a wildlife documentary and you want to see the animals in the savannah. You don't go running around the savannah. You go to the waterhole and set up your camera there. In the course of the day and the night, all the animals in the savannah are going to come to the water hole. In the same way, if you want to understand your mind, you have to be in a position where you can set up your attention right where there's suffering and yet not get scared off by it.

This is why we use the breath and develop the breath so that it gives rise to a sense of well-being in the present moment. We breathe in a way that feels good coming in, feels good going out. That way, you know that when physical suffering or mental anguish get bad, you've got a safe place to go. You don't feel so threatened by them.

Once this safe place is solid, then you can start making your forays into, say, the experience of physical pain to figure out what's going on here. What is it about the physical pain that scares you so? If you look carefully at it, ask some questions about it, and try to comprehend it, then you begin to see that a lot of the problem is due to those animals coming around the pain. They come to the waterhole, commenting on it—"I don't like this; I hate this; I'm afraid of this"—creating perceptions about what this pain is, thinking about how long it's been there, how long it may be there, and what it means in terms of the future of your health.

The mind can create all kinds of narratives around it, and that's just physical pain. Mental pain is even worse. But if you learn how to watch these things as they come and go, you begin to see that a lot of these animals are totally unnecessary, which means that the added stress and pain they pile on top of the pain is also unnecessary. That's when you can abandon them.

That's an important distinction. You can't abandon stress and suffering, but you *can* abandon the cause. In other words, you can stop doing it. The mental stress, which is the real problem, will go away. When you can see this fact in action, even just once as it's actually happening, it really changes your relationship to pain. You realize it's not as scary as you thought it was. You can develop the skill to be with it and yet not suffer from it.

You can also use the breath to look at mental pain because mental pain has a lot to do with all the different voices in your head, many of which you identify with. If you can stay with the breath and learn how to simply watch these things, you begin to see, or you recognize: This is that person's voice that you've adopted, and that's another person's voice you've adopted. And you realize you don't have to agree with any of the voices. You can just watch them.

Then, as you pull back from them like this, you begin to see: These are the things that are causing the stress. These are the things that are causing the suffering. If you run with them, it just adds more suffering. But you learn that you don't have to run with them. You don't have to believe everything the mind cooks up. It's as if you have a whole committee in there: all the different identities you've taken on, which have worked to one extent or another. They're all potentially there with their opinions on things. And many of them are very ignorant.

But with the solidity that comes from concentration, you can begin to watch these identities in action and see that many of them, which have had power in your mind for who knows how long, are not really voices you want to identify with. They're there, but you don't have to take on that identity. It's like a car coming up, and the driver says, "Jump in!" In the past, we always jumped in without any idea of who the driver was or where he was planning to take us. But now you realize you don't have to. You can quiz the driver: "Who are you? Where are we going?" And you can learn to tell when the driver's lying.

This really liberates the mind from a lot of unnecessary suffering. When your mind is not weighed down, you can look around and see other people. You see their suffering and maybe you can help them. There's never any guarantee that you can, but at least to some extent you're in a better position to be helpful when you're not so burdened by your own suffering.

But unless you take care of this inner suffering, you're not going to be able really to help others because there's always this weight inside. And if you can't really take care of your deeper suffering like this, there's no way you can help other people take care of theirs. You don't know how it's done. You may have read books, you may have heard nice ideas and Dhamma talks, but unless you really take care of this problem inside you, there will always be problems.

Once you *do* take care of this, the problems are gone. Nothing weighs on the mind. There will be the stress of having a body. The body will grow old, get sick and die—as all bodies do. But when you've understood why the mind was creating suffering around the body, and realize you don't have to do that, then the suffering of the body and the suffering of events outside just don't weigh you down.

Ajaan Suwat once asked a question about the mountain over there, Mount Palomar, on the east horizon: "Is that mountain heavy?" Of course, when an ajaan asks a question like that, you know it's a trick. Everybody just kind of looked at one another. Then, he gave the answer: "Well, if you try to pick it up, it's heavy. If you don't pick it up, it's not heavy on you. It may be heavy in and of itself, but as long as you're not picking it up, it's not heavy in the spot that really matters."

And it's the same with all the suffering we carry around. If we learned how to put it down—even though the affairs of the world may be very unpleasant, they may not go the way we want them to, and we see a lot of suffering around us—it's not heavy on us. And when it's not heavy on us, then we can actually be of help.

This is why working on this problem is not selfish. It's your main responsibility. This is the one area where you really are responsible, and you really are capable of putting an end to the problem. With other people, you can help to

some extent. But as I said, there's a large area within each of us that's inaccessible to anybody else. You can be a good example. You can offer advice. But if you can't take care of your own inner problem, you'll be a burden on others.

So this is where your number one responsibility lies, what should be your number one priority in life. The more time you can give to this problem, the better, because you're working in an area where you really *can* make a difference, and you know the difference is good. The various skills and knowledge of the world out there: Sometimes you do research and find all kinds of fascinating things that you hope will be used skillfully by other people. You never know. They may use that knowledge to harm themselves or others.

But the knowledge that puts an end to suffering is always good. It can't be abused. So even if you don't master any other skills in this life, make sure you master this one.