

Stop Weaving

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That dog is suffering, so it wants to spread its suffering around. That's the usual response of living beings. Simply the fact of having a body, having feelings, perceptions, thought-constructs, consciousness, clinging to these things, we suffer. Carrying these things around as a burden, we suffer. It's because we weigh ourselves down that we feel overburdened. When you're overburdened, the least little thing can set you off, and you end up spreading that suffering around.

One of the things we learn as meditators is not to spread it around. If there's suffering here, we want to stop it right here. Any bad karma that comes your way, let it stop right there. There's a Thai expression: "to continue weaving something." In other words, you've got a basket that's half finished, and you just continue weaving it, making it into a bigger basket. The problem is a lot of the times it's a bad basket to begin with, yet you feel compelled to keep on weaving it. The same thing happens with interpersonal relationships. Somebody starts something bad, and we continue where they left off. Good or bad, we continue weaving it.

This is why equanimity is such an important skill to develop. Good things come, bad things come: Learn to keep the mind on an even keel so that you can see how they come and then see how they go. Watching them coming and going, you begin to realize you don't have to burden yourself down with them. You don't have to keep on weaving them.

There's a teaching in the commentaries about what they call the three cycles: the cycle of action, the cycle of results, and the cycle of defilement. They're actually three steps in one cycle. First there's the action, which can be skillful or unskillful. Then there's the result, which depends on the skillfulness of the action. If the action was unskillful, you develop a dislike for the result. If the action was skillful, you often get attached to the result. You want it to keep on going. Either way, you give rise to defilements in the mind, and that's the third cycle. Then, under the power that defilement, you act again, and the cycle just keeps going around.

Now, you can't cut the cycle between the action and the result. That's the part that's totally out of your hands. You can, however, cut it between the result and the defilement, or the defilement and the action. In other words, greed, anger, and delusion arise in your mind as a result of either an experience of pleasure or an experience of pain, but you can decide to not act on them. That takes restraint. And often with restraint, we feel a kind of pressure: "You've got to act on this."

The restraint is pushing against your impulse to act, which is why cutting the cycle between the result of the action and the defilement is a lot more skillful. But if you gotten to the point where there's a defilement in the mind, you still don't have to let it out.

This is one the reasons we work with the breath. As you get more and more acquainted with the breath, you begin to realize how certain ways of breathing actually aggravate the problem. Other ways of breathing can help dissipate, disperse the problem. If you're sitting here, and the breath feels really good coming in, really good going out, all kinds of other things can happen in the world and you don't feel affected. You feel a sense of well-being that comes from within that's not touched by those things. As Ajaan Lee says, they can come and curse your mother, and it doesn't really affect you. You don't get angry. It's as if the mind is well fed. If you're hungry and tired, people can say even the slightest thing that's critical, and you lash out. But if you're feeling well fed and in a good mood, you can take the criticism and actually laugh along with them, actually agree with them: "Yeah, that's right." Then maybe you can do something about what you've been doing wrong.

This is why it's good to have the breath as an ally. When feelings of greed or anger come welling up from the mind, instead of feeling that restraint bottles them in, you can think of allowing whatever pressure you feel in the body as a result of the emotion to dissipate out your hands, out your feet. There's an extent to which this path we're following depends on your ability to keep your hands and feet relaxed in all situations. What that means is that you're able to keep mindful, alert, with a sense of the whole body, and you can keep the breath in the whole body really still, full, pleasant, refreshing, no matter what's happening. That way, restraint doesn't feel like you're being imprisoned. You just dissipate the pressure, and you realize you really wouldn't want to follow on that action when you've had a chance to look at it from a calmer point of view.

But still you've got the issue that pleasure and pain can still give rise to defilement. That's what you want to look into. This may be one of the meanings of that old koan about the sound of one hand: Pleasure and pain can come, but you don't have another hand of liking or disliking to clap them. The pleasure comes or the pain comes, and that's it. It goes away. That involves more insight: the ability to see sensory contact, sensor impingement simply as that, without your feeling that *you're* being impinged on, or *you're* being attacked by it. See it simply as something comes and goes, and because it comes and goes, it's really nothing but stress. When it's nothing but stress, you don't have to put a "me" or a "mine" on

it. You don't have to lay claim to it. It's just something that's there. It comes and it goes and that's it.

As the Buddha said, when you don't react to these things with all your "me's" and "mine's" and biases, they're just that: stress arising, stress passing away. When you look at these things as empty—in other words, they're arising and passing away not necessarily aimed at you, they're just events, and you don't lay all sorts of layers of interpretation on them in terms of who you are or what that other person is; these things are just sound, just feelings, just sights, tastes, tactile sensations—that's it. You can let yourself see these things as empty of all the other narratives and constructs you'd normally put on them. That way, you really undercut the basis for the defilement—and you cut the circle at a much more effective spot. Pleasure can come; pain can come. They're just stress arising and passing one way or another. Even the pleasure, you realize, is a kind of stress.

That way, whatever the suffering, whatever the problem, it just stops right there. You don't spread it around, not even in your own mind, much less to other people. And because you're not weighing yourself down, you find that you're able to withstand a lot more. All those narratives about how you've been mistreated in the past, or whatever the narratives may be, just put them aside. Take them apart. See that you don't really get anything out of them.

It's because we think we get something out of these things that we keep them going. There *is* a certain amount of gratification to them. As the Buddha said, if you want to understand that the problems of the mind, the unskillful habits of the mind, you first have to look at what kind of gratification you get out of maintaining them. Even the habits you don't like about yourself: There's got to be something that you enjoy in them. Otherwise, they wouldn't keep coming back with so many hooks.

When you're honest enough to see that "Yes, there's something I really like about this," then you can do something about it. You look at what you like about it and see that it's really not worth the pain, the dangers, the drawbacks. You can see that because you also realize that you get a lot more gratification, a lot more satisfaction out of following the path, developing the skillful qualities of mind that are part of the path: mindfulness, alertness, a sense of ease and rapture that come with concentration. These are a lot more gratifying, a lot more fulfilling. And you realize you've got the choice. You can either go with your old narratives or you can stick with your new skills.

This is one of the reasons why it's good to have the breath as your ally. It gives you an alternative, a foundation, a standing point. You can see how these processes among these cycles of action and result and defilement are really not

worth getting involved in. You don't have to continue weaving the cycles. Just leave them with their frayed ends dangling. There's no need for closure. You just drop the process, and it just disappears. Other frayed ends may come up, but again you don't have to continue weaving them, because if you continue weaving them for yourself, it simply means more suffering for yourself, and you find that you'll spread some more to other people.

So we use these skills that we develop in meditation—the concentration and the discernment—so that whatever suffering or stress comes up in your lives, it stops right there. There's no need to pass it on, no need to add one last word. Let it stop in midsentence. Let the basket stop halfway down, because it wasn't a good basket to begin with. That takes a huge burden off your mind and the minds of the people around you.