

## *The Buddha's Basic Therapy*

*July 28, 2010*

When we come to the practice, we often want to go straight to the top: the four noble truths, the three characteristics, emptiness. It's like building a house without a foundation, or setting up a pole without having anything to support it. The foundation is important; the supports are important. Just because something is elementary doesn't mean that it's beneath us. It deals with elements, it deals with basic principles that have to be established before you can build on top of it.

This is why, in most cases, when the Buddha taught the four noble truths he didn't start out with the four noble truths. He started out with what's called a graduated discourse, building on really basic things like generosity and virtue. And even these build on a foundation, which is what's called mundane right view. The way it's expressed in the Canon is rather strange: It starts out by saying, "There *is* what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed; there *is* mother and father; there *are* spontaneously reborn beings; there *is* this world and the next world; and there are those who know these things for sure, from direct knowledge—it's not just a theory."

Maybe it's because these sentences sound so strange that people skip over this teaching. But then, as we've seen so often in the West, the people who try to skip over things like this end up finding that the practice can sometimes actually aggravates whatever mental problems they have. A lot of neurotic people come to the practice—and Western culture is pretty neurotic to begin with—and sometimes insight practice or mindfulness practice can aggravate some of those problems. This is why some teachers say, "Well, you've got to do psychotherapy to work along with the meditation, to deal with the problems."

But the Buddha's already given us a way of dealing with those problems, with mundane right view. It, too, is therapeutic. When the Buddha's talking about generosity, he's saying generosity *is real*: People give because they have the choice to give. This means it comes out of the goodness of their hearts. And generosity bears fruit. In other words, the goodness of your heart does bear fruit.

Perhaps one of the reasons we're so messed up in the West is because our culture is designed so that goodness of heart doesn't really count for much. Our society is designed to take advantage of good-hearted people. They're not the ones who rise to the top. And because we believe that rising to the top is what matters,

goodness of heart doesn't seem to count for much. And the Buddha wants to reestablish that it does.

Even in India, of course, society was not necessarily designed so that the good people would rise to the top. Remember when the Buddha would talk about kings, he would often put them in the same phrase with thieves: "kings and thieves." And so it wasn't the case that society was moral back then and somehow changed now. There are, and have been, a lot of immoral elements in human society, all over the world. But the Buddha's asking you to look at the good results that come from generosity: not only the impact on the person who receives the gift, but also the good things that happen in your own heart when you're generous. He's saying, "Value that." Value the freedom of choice that you have; value the good results that come from generosity. These are important. They matter in the long run.

In fact, you often hear that Thai ajaans say that the whole practice is one thing clear through: You start with generosity and you end with letting go. And there's a lot of letting go in between, but it's letting go that happens in conjunction with developing good qualities of mind, and then appreciating those good qualities of mind. And it turns out that learning to appreciate these things is a part of the therapy of mundane right view.

"There is mother and father": This is another big issue. A lot of us have very conflicted relations with our parents. And it's not that this wasn't also the case in the Buddha's time. We all have a conflicted relationships with our parents. We're all disappointed in our parents one way or another. Because after all, parents are human beings. They have their imperfections. As the saying goes, it's a wise parent who knows his child—but children know their parents pretty thoroughly, much more thoroughly than the parents would like. But when the Buddha brings up the issue of mother and father, he's bringing it up as an issue of gratitude.

Gratitude is another of those good-hearted qualities that's nourishing for the person who can develop it. Sometimes we feel that our parents don't deserve our gratitude. If we're grateful, we may feel we're giving them something they don't deserve. But that's not the case at all. As we develop gratitude, we develop something that works to our advantage: a sense of appreciation. If nothing else, they gave us this body. Our mothers went through pregnancy, with all the difficulties connected with that.

There's the chant they give in Thailand before a young man ordains as a monk. Nowadays they give it less and less, but in the old days it was a standard part of the

ordination ceremony that, before the ceremony began, you'd sit and listen to a chant that would go on for about two or three hours, about all the trouble your parents went through to raise you. Perhaps ninety-percent of the chant is about your mother's pregnancy: all the illnesses and other problems she had, carrying this load around in her body. And if you can't be grateful for *that*, what *are* you going to be grateful for?

So you have to look at your parents and all their imperfections, and realize that you owe them a huge debt regardless. And again, in developing an attitude of gratitude, it's not just a question of whether they deserve. You benefit from it. It's therapeutic for the mind to realize that—regardless of their failings, regardless of whatever abuse you may have suffered, whatever disappointments you may have experienced—gratitude is healthy for the mind, because it helps you to appreciate all the good things, all the efforts that people went through to help you. And how you are dependent on their help. And that'll make you a better and happier person.

Because again, one of the problems in modern society is that people make huge fortunes and say, "I did this all on my own. I don't owe anything to anybody." They say this with a certain pride, but also a certain bitterness. And what they say is simply not true. If you really look around, you realize that nobody does anything on their own. We're all dependent on our parents, teachers, all the various things that society provides, that the government has provided, that generous people have provided in one way or another. And it's good to keep that in mind. Because when you realize the goodness that you are dependent on, it makes you much more inclined to do good yourself.

A while back I was reading an article in a magazine about gratitude, and the author was focusing on the gout-weed in her garden—which, apparently, is a really tenacious weed, very hard to eradicate. She said she was learning how to develop gratitude to the gout-weed because it taught her good lessons about persistence and acceptance. That's missing the point: The gout-weed has no intention to do anything good for you or to teach you any lessons. You may appreciate the lessons you've managed to learn from the gout-weed, but gratitude is for actions that living beings have taken the trouble to do in order to do good, not for tenacious weeds.

In Pāli, they have two words for gratitude—*kataññu* and *katavedin*—which taken together mean of a sense of gratitude for what you owe to other people for the actions they've done, and the desire to do something in return, either directly to

them or for the world at large. Notice, the focus here is on action, because that's what can be really special, the things that people do when they go out of their way to do something good. Having appreciation for that, having gratitude for that, makes it easier for *you* to go out of your way.

The gout-weed doesn't have any intention at all; it just grows. You may appreciate the lessons you learn from it, but the gratitude should be reserved for the actions of living beings. Because your relationship with gout-weed is not nearly as conflicted as, say, your relationship with your parents—or other people to whom you have debts. And it's important to sort those issues out before you can really make any progress in the practice. Not necessarily going back and hashing things out with the people, but hashing out your attitude. Because you will find, as you practice, that you have developed some pretty unskillful attitudes from your parents.

The Buddha had to teach people to drop a lot of the attitudes they had learned from their parents in his time. And you can let go of those attitudes with a sense of ease, with a sense of peace, only if you're at peace with the people from whom you learned them. Realizing that they were well-meaning helps so that you're not throwing those attitudes away out of anger or aversion; you're simply trying to sift through the relationship to see what's worth of keeping and what's worth throwing away. And if it can be done in an attitude of gratitude, it's a lot easier to do this skillfully.

As for this world and the next, and the spontaneously reborn beings—i.e., beings born in heaven and hell without any parents—that's basically the principle of karma and rebirth. This, too, is a therapeutic teaching. Because whatever difficulties come up, you can say, "Well, I must've done something in the past." And it's not to blame yourself for it, but just to have a better attitude of equanimity for the hardships that inevitably come up in life.

At the same time, you can realize that here you are, a human being. The fact that you're a human being depended on your good actions in the past. So you don't want to simply use up all the good that's come from the effort you've put in in the past. You want to take your profits and reinvest them, rather than just eating them up. And to realize that life goes on—even after death—helps you to put current difficulties into perspective. We sometimes think of rebirth as a teaching of Self—in capital letters—but in the Buddha's teaching it's actually associated with the teaching on *not-self*: There's so much in this lifetime you're going to have to let go, abandon, leave behind. The question is, what can you take

with you? And all those people and all the corporations who've stepped on other people in order to get ahead: That position they gained, they're not going to be able to take with them. All they're taking is the karma from stepping on people's heads—which is not a good thing to take with you.

So again, this helps give you an attitude of equanimity, a sort of disenchantment with many of the values of the world. And it's also therapy for the mind. As you stick to what's right, there sometimes may be disadvantages now, but they're not going to be disadvantages always. The Buddha said the sign of wisdom is when you look for *long-term* happiness. And sometimes long-term happiness requires letting go of short-term happiness.

So the teachings on karma and rebirth help give you a long view. The Buddha never tried to prove that these things were true, but he said that they're a really good working hypothesis. And they are therapeutic. If you learn how to use his teachings well, they're all therapeutic. There are a lot of unskillful ways of using the teaching, but the Buddha never encouraged them.

For example, there's the "blaming the victim" attitude toward kamma, saying, "Well, people are suffering right now, and the fact that they're suffering means they deserved it." That's not the case; the Buddha never talks about anybody *deserving* anything. It's just that there's action and then there are results. The actual pleasure or pain, happiness or suffering, that we feel right now depends, to a large extent, on our present karma: how we deal with the raw materials from the past.

When you think in those terms, it gives a real focus to the meditation: that we're here to learn about present karma, to see, "What are we doing *right now* that's contributing unnecessary suffering, unnecessary stress?" That, too, is a therapeutic teaching. It puts you more in charge. It means that regardless of the situation outside, you can always look *inside* and solve the problem from the inside, making sure that, at the very least, you're not adding anything extra. And it turns out that it's the extra stuff, the extra craving and clinging that we add: That's what really weighs the mind down. The mind doesn't have to be weighed down, no matter how bad things get outside.

So all these teachings—even though they may sound strange in the Pāli, or in the way they're phrased in the Canon—really are therapy. They get the mind in the right position, a healthy position, so that it can handle the four noble truths, the three perceptions, and all the other, more advanced teachings.

So don't overlook the foundation. The foundation is important; without it, you can't build a house. If you try building the house without the foundation,

then, when an earthquake comes, it'll just slide down the hill.

And remember: There's really nothing missing in the Buddha's teachings. It's just that we tend to overlook certain teachings because we don't realize how useful and valuable they are. But when you take the path *as a whole*, you find that everything's there. It's just a matter of putting it to the proper use.