Twenty Subtle Causes of Suffering

Introduction to a Series of Twenty Teachings

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Introduction

Although we say this human life is precious, we can also see that it needs to transform. It needs to transform from discursiveness into wisdom. It needs to make the right choice and choose to *recognize* its precious quality, and to exercise its freedom to retain its own basic awareness. Therefore, we need to see all the negativity that must be abandoned, and to work to transform disturbing emotions.

In order to transform disturbing emotions, we have to ask, "What are these disturbing emotions? What is it that we are trying to overcome?

Of the fifty-one mental events that are said to constantly pre-occupy the mind, twenty afflictions are mentioned in particular.

These mental events are defined as aspects of the mind that apprehend the quality of an object, and have the ability to color the mind. Among these, the most prominent negative and disturbing ones are called the three root poisons—anger, desire, and ignorance. By adding jealousy and pride, or arrogance to these, we get the five root poisons. And from these come twenty subsidiary afflictions. Buddha's hinayana approach to these afflictions is very realistic, grounded, and practical. The Buddha approaches the negative emotions of the three root poisons very directly: "See anger, desire, and ignorance as poison and abandon them." There could be absolutely no greater or more direct truth, no teaching more direct and clear than this very straight message.

Not One More Step

If you are walking towards the edge of a roof, at some point you know that if you take one more step, you will fall off the roof and die. If you have common sense, you don't do that. Your common sense says, "Not one more step." Likewise, there is the example of not poking your finger into the electric outlet to see where the hole leads. Even though the house is full of electrical outlets, you don't do that; you know you will get electrocuted and die. Your common sense knows not to do these things.

How is this different from disturbing emotions? In India, when westerners drink a cup of tea or water, there is a lot of examining of that water: Is it clean? Is it safe? Is it good or not good? But do we concentrate on disturbing emotions as much as we concentrate on the pureness of our water? How difficult is it to see when something is negative, poisonous, and harmful to oneself and others—and abstain from it?

What is poisonous should be abandoned. It is not necessary,
nor good for yourself or others. Be good. That's it.

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If we took this direct, simple, and profoundly truthful approach of the hinayana teachings, we would not have to work on all the various methods of transformation, transcendence, and various such complex methods of practices.

Buddhist Complexity and the Stubbornness of Mind

In a way, we could say that Buddhadharma is a very complicated path of practice. In the history of Tibetan Buddhism, for example, there was no one greater or more learned than the great Longchenpa. It is said that when he died, twenty or thirty elephants could not carry the number of texts he had memorized. Nevertheless at the time of his death, Longchenpa said that what he knew of the limitless, unsurpassable dharma was like the tip of a needle compared to the expanse of the sky. That's how vast, profound and complex Buddhism is.

The numbers of texts by all the great teachers throughout the history of Buddhism is endless. From the genuine wisdom mind of great masters came no less than a dozen volumes in a lifetime. Then each of their great students composed dozens of commentaries on these dozens of root texts, and each subsequent generation keeps adding to that, as the complexities of the human mind continue to create the need for even more intricate explanations. Going into the details of each dharma subject, one word can lead to hundreds of days of explanation, with still more to analyze, ponder, and work with. No matter how big a temple or library you build, you would run out of space were you to archive all these teachings—and those are just the commentaries in black-and-white written form. Besides these, there are all the practices to engage in.

Not only is Buddhist doctrine one of the most profound and intricate philosophies, the practices with their many thousands of methods are some of the most complex. As long as you drag out the stubbornness of mind, methods of dharma practices will also remain complex and long drawn. This way, engaging in the path of practice could be a journey of thousands of years. There is said to be a method for each individual and an antidote for each deception, making them limitless in number. If you boil them down, however, all these complexities are as simple as you just letting go and abiding in peace.

The forms you visualize, the mantras you recite, the good behavior you adopt, the vows and samayas you keep, the lineages you follow, the retreats, readings, and meditations you do, and all that comprises the universe of dharma teachings—none of it would be necessary if you would get to the crucial point. What is poisonous should be abandoned. It is not necessary or good for yourself or others. Be good. That's it.

Getting to the Point

As limitless, complex, and vast as the teachings of dharma are, they can be condensed into what the Buddha taught in his very direct Sutra teachings. So, while we can beat around the bush talking about the many methods for transforming or becoming free from disturbing emotions, I always think, "Get to the point."

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But we don't get to the point. Simplicity is what we are most incapable of understanding. Why are we incapable of understanding a simple, direct approach? It is because the deceptions and hypocrisy of ego do not make things easy. Because the ego-based mind is so very intricate and complex, the antidote must be just as intricate and complex.

None of the buddhas, bodhisattvas, or great teachers planned to burden practitioners with vast numbers of methods or the complexities of different views. But to measure up to the resistance and stubbornness of the ego-based mind, the antidotes must be even more powerful.

There are many monks, nuns and retreatants who are wonderful practitioners and have done many years of retreat, which is excellent. That is the way to devote your life to the dharma. It is an exceptional practice. On the other hand, it sometimes seems ironic to have to close yourself up in a box before you can actually determine, "I'm going to be a good person."

You give birth to a simple thought—I'm not going to hold onto anger; I'll let go of stinginess and selfishness; I will stop being jealous; I will not be arrogant; I will not be ignorant or succumb to delusion—and then there is resistance. If the resistance continues for one year, you go into a practice retreat for one year. If it continues for a second year, you continue your retreat for a second year. If it continues for three years, you go into the continuity of a three-year retreat. And if life-long stubbornness persists, life-long retreat has to be generated.

Fundamentally the most important, most helpful approach is to recognize that the negativities, discursiveness, and afflictions called "disturbing emotions" are poisonous by nature—and simply not get into them. Just use the same common sense that does not allow you to step off the edge of a precipice; the same common sense that can see whether or not what you are taking into your body is safe. You could express this in a more lofty way and call it "discerning wisdom." But it is simply, common sense: the common sense to discern an unhealthy, destructive habit and abstain from it.

The simple approach is one of the most powerful, direct ways to eliminate the causes and conditions that are harmful to yourself and others. You begin by identifying those harmful causes and conditions. For example, you identify anger. Seeing its destructive nature, you do not indulge in anger—and if you call yourself a Buddhist, that alone requires you not to indulge in anger. Eliminate anger, and you have no disturbing emotion. Eliminate desire, and you have no disturbing emotion. Eliminate ignorance, and you have no disturbing emotion.

To be a bit more specific, we could go into what are called the "twenty afflictions."

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Ver. 1.1 2015-3-13