

In Your Power

December 28, 2005

When the Buddha tells you to look inside for the causes of your suffering, it's not a case of blaming the victim. He's trying to remind you of what does lie in your power to change. There may be a lot of things outside that contribute to your suffering, but you can't change them. Or you could change them if you spent a lot of time. But there's no certainty as to how permanent that change would be.

So as meditators, we're not here trying to settle old scores or to create justice in the world. We're trying to figure out what we're doing that's contributing to our own suffering. After all, we go to all the effort of thinking and acting and speaking with the purpose of causing happiness, and yet the results don't always come out that way. In fact, most of the time they come out the other way. We end up causing suffering for ourselves. That's the big paradox in life.

Fortunately, the way we act and speak and think depending on our intentions is something we can change. We can learn from our mistakes. That's what the first noble truth is all about. We make mistakes when our desires are frustrated, but we can learn from those frustrated desires if we look at them in the right way.

That's where appropriate attention comes in. Appropriate attention is not simply looking at things as they are, because there are a lot of truths out there that are totally irrelevant to what we're trying to do. We're trying to find happiness, trying to figure out how we're creating suffering. Appropriate attention helps us in our efforts by looking at things in terms of four noble truths. Where is there suffering in your experience right now? Where is there stress? Where is there a sense of being burdened? Look for that. Try to comprehend it. Figure out where the causes are, specifically the causes coming from mind. Desire colored by ignorance, motivated by ignorance, shaped by ignorance: That ignorance is the real problem.

So you want to attack the problem at the cause. Which means you have to try to find a path that leads to wisdom, to knowledge. That's what the noble eightfold path is all about: letting go of qualities that get in the way of knowledge. You abandon wrong speech, abandon wrong action, abandon wrong livelihood. Why is that? Because those things make you dishonest. When your mind is dishonest, its left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing; the left brain doesn't know what the right brain is doing. Or at least we pretend not to know. And in that pretending not to know, we set up all kinds of walls inside that make it hard to see what's really going on.

So you learn to act and speak in ways that lead to honesty, so that you don't have to hide things from yourself. That way, you can develop more the qualities you need for deeper insight: mindfulness, alertness, concentration—all the factors for awakening.

As you create more knowledge, you also create less and less suffering. The knowledge you want is specifically in terms of the stress, the cause of stress, and what you can do to stop that cause. Those are the truths you want to see. That's what it means to have appropriate attention. You can learn ideas about appropriate attention by reading the texts, but the actual problem is in your own mind. You can spend our time looking at the suttas, but you're looking in the wrong place. The problem is not in the suttas. The problem is in your mind. You have to straighten out your mind. You use the teachings from the suttas as tools, but you've got to develop the qualities that lead to the knowledge within the mind, so that you can see the mind in action as it's creating suffering. You catch it in the act. Then you can stop it.

It's like a dog peeing on your rug. If you hit it while it's peeing on the rug, it'll stop. It won't do that anymore. In the same way, when you're thinking or acting or speaking in ways that are causing suffering, if you catch that connection in the act, you'll stop. You say, "Wait a minute, this is unnecessary. This is really burden on the mind." And you can't blame anybody else.

So appropriate attention means looking at the right things in the right way. There are a lots of truths you could look at that are totally irrelevant to what's the big problem in life: the fact that you're creating suffering even though your efforts are aimed at creating happiness.

So you look at things in the right way. Look at the right things at the right place. And you bring the right qualities of mind. Start with mindfulness, but not just any old mindfulness. Start with right mindfulness, establishing mindfulness in the right way at the right places: right at the body in and of itself, at feelings in and of themselves, the mind in and of itself, mental qualities in and of themselves—ardent, alert and mindful putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world, taking these things simply as events in and of themselves.

Then you watch to see what skillful and unskillful mental states come up around those frames of reference. That's what it means to engage in analysis of dhammas. Notice what you're doing that's giving good results. Knowing what you're doing that's getting bad results.

When you develop the qualities giving good results and abandon the ones giving bad results, that's right effort.

As you apply that, it gives sense to a rapture, sense of fullness, which is important. You need this rapture in your meditation. Otherwise it gets dry. Wherever you sense any refreshment, allow that refreshment to spread throughout the body. Drink it in. That's another meaning of the word, *piti*: what you drink in as you're meditating. This allows the mind to settle down with a sense of peace, concentration, equanimity. Those are the factors for awakening.

That's what you've got to develop. There is work to be done. You have to will these things to happen. It's not that they're going to happen on their own. They happen through trial and error. You figure out what works and what doesn't work, specifically in with regard to the Buddha's questions: Where's the stress? What's causing it? What can I do to stop it?

This is what appropriate attention is all about: not trying to figure who was responsible for all the rights and wrongs of the world, but simply figuring out why you're suffering right now and why the hell you're adding to your suffering. You have to have that kind of attitude. You can't be equanimous about the fact that you're causing suffering. It's something you've got to stop. As soon as you recognize that you're causing it, why continue? After all, it takes effort to act and speak and think, so why are you putting effort into creating suffering?

These are the questions you ask. These are the ways you frame the issue. This is where you look. The Buddha said that he taught just stress and suffering, and the end of stress and suffering. That's it. Yet we keep trying to drag in other issues as well, making the real issue a lot more complicated than it has to be. When you look straight at the issue, straight at the problem, and clear away all the unnecessary clutter, you can actually deal with the problem properly, so that no matter what anyone else is doing to inflict pain on you, either physically or mentally, you realize that that's their business. That's not your concern. Your concern is: What are you doing to add to the pain, to add to the suffering? That you can stop. That much is in your power.

And as it turns out, what's really in your powers is all that really matters. Once you stop creating suffering, there's no suffering in the mind. That's the end of all problems.

That's why this kind of attention is called appropriate attention, because it tackles the problem right at the genuine cause and solves it in a genuine way. And ultimately that's all you really need to know. Just make sure that you know in the right way at the right place, and that kind of knowledge will take care of everything.