

An End to Suffering

July 7, 2006

The Buddha once said that all he taught was dukkha and the end of dukkha, stress and the end of stress, suffering and the end of suffering. That's it.

And his main teaching on suffering is that the causes for suffering lie within the mind: ignorance and craving. If you're going to put an end to suffering, you've got to look right here. You can't depend on anybody else outside to do the looking for you. Which you can take either as good news or bad news.

The bad news, of course, is that you've got to do the work. You've got to look at your own actions to see where you're causing yourself stress and suffering—something we really don't like to do. The mind resists looking at what it's doing, looking at the stress it's causing for itself.

This is one of the reasons why people don't follow meditation instructions. They're told to look at the breath and they figure out something else they've got to do instead. Or they're told to look at their own mind and they figure out something else they've got to do instead. Anything but looking at their own mind.

And then, when they don't get results from the meditation, they blame the Buddha, they blame the teacher, they blame *somebody*, anybody, but in any case, it's not their own fault.

So, watch out for that tendency.

The good news, of course, is that if you really do look at your own mind, you really start seeing and understanding things: You start seeing how it's causing stress and suffering. And you can do something about it. You can change your ways. You don't have to wait for somebody else to come and do it for you. You don't have to go out and bow down and pray to some god to take away your suffering, or hope for some miracle person who's going to come along and do some ceremony or some whatever to end your problem for you. Because if you had to depend on those things, that would put you in a real position of weakness.

So the good news is that you can put an end to your suffering if you really look at what you're doing to cause the suffering.

As the Buddha said, when you decide to take on this issue, the duty with regard to stress and suffering is to comprehend it. That means you have to watch it for a while and see what's causing the suffering.

And to do that, you have to develop the path. You have to take a certain course of action—which is supposedly what we're doing right now: trying to get the mind into concentration, or at the very least trying to get rid of unskillful

qualities and to develop skillful qualities in the mind. That's right effort. Develop the desire to do this. Stick with that desire and be intent on carrying it through.

In other words, really pay attention to what's happening. See what works and what doesn't work.

Sometimes, as the Buddha said, when there's an unskillful quality in the mind, all you have to do is sit and watch it. Especially when it's very strong, many times all you *can* do is just sit and watch. So, at the very least, try to have some spot in the mind where you can stay and just be the observer. Remember, not everything that comes up in the mind has to be identified with. Just tell yourself, "I'm just going to watch and see what happens here." Sometimes that's enough to see through the unskillful qualities.

Simply the fact that you've not been watching the mind very carefully—you've been often looking at something else—is what allows a lot of these unskillful qualities to sneak in and take over. The fact that you've decided now you're going to watch them makes a difference.

What do you watch for? Well, one, watch for the fact that they arise and pass away, and two, watch for any tendency you might have to want to identify with them. Even knowing that they're unskillful, you may still want to identify with them. That's because the mind always gets some pleasure out of greed, gets some pleasure out of anger and delusion. If it didn't get *some* pleasure out of these things, it wouldn't indulge in them. So you've got to look for what that pleasure is.

What is the mind feeding on when it's feeding on lust? What is it feeding on when it's feeding on anger? Here we're even talking about giving in to the anger or giving in to the lust in your external activities. What pleasure does the mind get simply out of thinking thoughts of lust? What does it get out of thoughts of anger? Any sense of self-righteousness there may be in the anger or whatever: Notice that. Watch for it.

And then look for the downside of all these things. When the mind feeds on lust, exactly what is it feeding on? What does it lead to? Ajaan Suwat used to like to comment that most of the murders in the world take place between people who've had sex with each other. If lust were such a good thing, why would it lead to something like that? Watch it. See where it goes.

The same with anger: Anger is one of those qualities that's really obviously bad, and yet we love to indulge in it. Why? Look both for the gratification and for the drawbacks. See where the balance lies.

Sometimes just watching something like this is enough to help you lose your taste for it. Other times, you have to work on it. You really have to contemplate it. See what you can do to counteract the lust and counteract the anger, counteract

the ignorance that doesn't want to look at these things.

The best way to do that is to give the mind a place where it can stay and just watch and not feel compelled to give in to these things. That's why we work on the mindfulness, that's why we work on the concentration—being aware of the breath, being aware of the body, just in and of itself sitting right here. This gives the mind at least something of a foundation. You've got at least a scrap of a place to stand. It's better than having no place to stand at all and just being swept away by the currents of the mind. So work on that.

And then hold onto whatever sense of presence of mind, whatever sense of mindfulness you can manage in the present moment. Because that's going to be your foundation. That's where the path takes place.

But the important thing is the willingness, the desire to engage in right effort, the willingness to watch the mind and want to do something about it. You've got to nurture that desire.

Because sometimes it gets lazy. Sometimes all it wants to do is just blank out and say, "I don't want to be responsible for this and maybe if I blank out enough, it'll all go away and I'll be done with it." Well, that doesn't work. There are times when simply watching things works but there are also times when you really have to analyze and comprehend before you'll come to any kind of solution. So you've got to be up for that kind of task.

Again, this is why we work with concentration, because when the mind does get concentrated there's a sense of ease, a sense of well-being. It feels good inside. It's nourishing, it's strengthening. And when you actually do the work, you get the results. Have some conviction in the path. This is what helps with that sense of desire, the sense of the willingness to put in the effort.

There's a phrase they have in Thailand, "People who know everything before they're born," or, "know everything before it happens." And it's not said in praise.

We all have a tendency to want to figure everything out beforehand and to know beforehand what's going to work and what's not going to work, so that we can skip over a lot of the work. But it doesn't work that way. You've got to go through the steps, giving the mind a place to stay and, at the very least, being mindful to know when something unskillful is going on in the mind and latching onto that realization, "Okay, this is unskillful, this is not going to lead to anything good." That way, you learn not to act on whatever is going through the mind at the time.

As that basis of mindfulness gets more stable, more established, you're more in a position where you can do things about what's going on in the mind, about how the mind is creating unnecessary stress and suffering for itself. Because this is what

you've got to see.

The Buddha said that if you really want to understand the mind, look for this, look at this aspect of stress that the mind is creating. See if you can learn to stop it. Try to figure it out.

This is where discernment comes in. A lot of the meditation lies in figuring out what's going wrong. You've got some guidance from the Buddha. But, as he said, you've got to do the work yourself. And it's through the desire to figure things out that discernment grows.

How are your perceptions shaping the way you do things? How do your perceptions of the results turn around and shape the way you do things the next time around? Look into that. This combination of perception and intention is what you've really got to learn to understand.

And there's the element of attention: what you pay attention to, what you decide is important to notice. There are so many things happening in the present moment—lots of sensory input coming in through lots of senses—and the mind is in a position where it can choose what to focus on and what not to.

That's the element of intention. It affects the way you attend to the things and the attention affects the next intention. So watch out for these things.

And believe the Buddha when he says the important things to know in the present moment are just four: There's stress, which should be comprehended. There's the cause of stress, which should be abandoned; the cessation of stress, which, when it happens, should be realized. And then there's the path of practice, these qualities of the mind you're trying to develop that will lead to the end of stress: Those should be developed. That's it. That's what you want to watch out for.

But we have all our narratives and other things to add on top of it.

When a narrative comes up, think about the Buddha on the night of his awakening. Those three knowledges: The first one was knowledge of narratives—all the narratives of all his past lives, countless past lives. Think of all the different narratives that were there: "Such was my birth, such was my name, such the food that I ate"—imagine that, that was one of his main memories of his past lives—the food he ate. His experience of pleasure and pain and, "such was my death"—each time around over and over and over again.

But he didn't go straight from there to looking into the present moment. The next step was to extrapolate out, to expand his range of awareness to all beings. How do they die? How are they reborn? This put his own narrative into some perspective. It wasn't just him. Everybody was dying and being reborn in line with their karma, enjoying the results of good karma, suffering from the results of bad

karma and then dying and then being reborn again, based on their intentions, which were shaped by their perceptions of things: their views, which were a combination of perception and attention. And his ability to get that larger view of the human condition, of the living-being condition : That was what enabled him to come into the present moment ready to do the work that needed to be done.

So when you find yourself entangled in your own personal narrative, try to get a larger view of the world: This is the way of human beings, living beings of all kinds. We all cause ourselves suffering. We cause one another suffering. Even when we're doing good karma, there's an element of stress there. Which means that the good can only last for so long.

So his next question was, "What happens if there's no intention?" Because intentions are what drive everything. What kind of views, what kind of perception and attentions will help understand intention and abandon it?

That chant we have: Aging, illness, and death. We do it occasionally: the one that says, "I'm subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, I'm subject to separation, I have my actions as my arbitrator." In the texts, they actually don't stop there. The next step is to reflect that all living beings are subject to the same conditions.

If you just focus on the "I" it helps give you some encouragement to get your act together. But if you focus on all living beings, it changes your perspective. This is what gets you on the path to the end of suffering.

So when you find yourself tied up in your narrative or tied up in your views, try to get a larger view. Think about the whole human condition for a while. The whole animal condition, the whole deva condition, all the levels of being.

Then the mind will be a lot more willing to settle down in the present and do the actual work that has to be done. Take the Buddha's teachings on suffering and regard them as good news. They remind you there is a way out. You'll be less attached to your old ways of doing things because you've taken that larger view. And you'll be more willing to take them on, simply as events in the present moment.

When you actually do the work then you find that the results the Buddha promised really do happen. There's not just suffering. There's also the end of suffering. That's why it really is good news.