

Suffering Comes from What You're Doing

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There's an old cliché we keep even now hearing from time to time, which is that the Buddha taught that life is suffering, that that's the first noble truth. Actually, if he'd said that, it would have been pretty useless. What he actually taught was something much more useful: Suffering is clinging, and clinging comes from craving.

In other words, the suffering comes from something we're *doing*. And the good news is we don't have to do that. We can do something else that doesn't cause suffering. That's the path. But first we have to understand what we're doing: what the clinging is, what the craving is. This is why we get the mind into concentration, get it to settle down so that we can watch these things in action.

Now, sometimes it takes a while for it to settle down. In that case, you have to be patient. Because if the mind is restless and you're impatient with your restless mind, that just stokes the fire. So find some spot in the mind, find some spot in the body, in the breath, that's relatively still, and as for the rest of the mind, just let it chatter for a while.

One of the basic principles of the practice is that we're practicing in an imperfect world and with an imperfect mind. We can't wait for everything to be perfect for us to practice. We have to make a little space for ourselves in the midst of all the imperfections—out there and in here—and hold on to that space, all the while being very patient with everything else. Just try to be as tenacious as you can, sticking with that spot, and as things begin to settle down, you can see more clearly what the mind is doing.

The Buddha defines discernment in several ways. One is as penetrating discernment into arising and passing away. Which means first you have to see things arise and pass away in the mind—but you don't just sit there. You try to make some things arise. In other words, you try to make mindfulness arise, you try to make concentration arise, so that you can have some tools. Without those tools, without their being solid and sharp, you won't be able to do the rest of the work you need to do. So it's not just a matter of watching things come and go, but also realizing you're playing a role in their coming and going.

This is where the other definition of discernment comes in: insight into fabrication. In other words, what is the mind doing? How does it shape its experience? This means you're not looking just for things arising and passing away, but you also want to see why. This is why playing with the breath, trying to get the mind into concentration, is an important part of discernment. Because you can watch things arise and pass away for your whole life without getting involved in them, and you would never know what was a cause for what. This thing comes, that thing goes. This thing comes with this thing: Well, are they actually connected or is it just a coincidence? You wouldn't know. But if you actually mess around with things a bit—

or even better, try to make something good out of the arising and passing away—you develop some standards. You can see *this* arises with *that*, and they're actually connected. Other things are just coincidences. Because you want to see, "What can I do to bring the mind to settle down? What can I do with the breath? How do I think about the breath?"

And what's the role of desire in all this? As the Buddha said, all dhammas are rooted in desire, which means all things good and bad that you can do. So you have craving on the one hand, which is a cause for suffering, but you also have desire on the path, the desire to be skillful: to prevent unskillful qualities from arising, to abandon unskillful qualities that have arisen, to give rise to skillful qualities and then to maintain them. There has to be desire for these things for the path to work. So is that your desire?

Once you've set your mind on that desire, the question is, how do you modulate it so that it's not getting in the way? We can want, want, want things to be a certain way, but all too often that wanting will get in the way. So you have to figure out how to use the desire to motivate yourself to actually approach things skillfully. Look for causes, focus your desire on the causes, and the results will take care of themselves.

So we're watching ourselves in action. This is why, as we said earlier, there are certain questions the Buddha put aside, things that were not related to what you're doing that's causing suffering and how can you stop. You put them aside either because they're irrelevant or because if you start asking those questions and trying to answer them, you get pulled further and further away from the path. The question always is, "What am I doing? What can I do differently if I don't like the results of what I'm doing?"

This is one of the reasons why conviction is one of the foundations for discernment: conviction in the principle that your actions really do make a difference; that when you do something, you're responsible; that your actions have an effect, and that the effect can either be short-term or long-term. These are all things we have to take on conviction, because there's no real proof, aside from a pragmatic proof. If you believed, say, in determinism, that your actions were not your responsibility, that you're compelled through some outside force to act in those ways, then there'd be no sense in trying to practice. There'd be nothing you could do that would change anything. On the other hand, if you believed that your actions had no consequences at all, again, that would mean that a path of practice would make no sense at all, because it wouldn't make any difference.

So those are assumptions you put aside. What you take as your working hypothesis is that your actions do come from within, the choices come from within, and they can have both short-term and long-term results, good or bad. And you want to figure out how to make them good. That's the desire based on that conviction.

So discernment isn't just a matter of sitting passively and observing things. You have to have some conviction and some desire to figure out your actions: What are you doing? Why

are you doing it? What are the results you're getting? Are they results you like? If not, what can you change?

That's how the Buddha found his awakening. He saw that he was not getting the results he wanted, so he kept going back to: What am I doing? What can I change in what I'm doing? That's where you're going to find the answers, by asking those questions of your own actions.

And if for the time being you can't figure out anything, well, just sit there and watch. There are times when what you've got to do is just sit there and watch. But watch the same way that, say, a cat would watch a mousehole. The cat's not just there noticing the shape of the hole or whatever. It's looking for the time: When is the mouse going to show its nose? In other words, when are you going to catch the mind in the course of making a decision that's coming back and causing it harm, causing it to suffer, creating stress for itself?

The Buddha analyzes this in five steps. You see things arising, then you see them passing away. As with restlessness: It's not there all the time. The mind will have to rest a little bit every now and then, then it stirs itself up again. So you want to catch it: One, when does it stop? And two, when it stirs itself up, why is it stirring itself up? Because you're not looking just for arising, you're looking for origination, as the Buddha said: what's causing it, what sparks it.

Sometimes you notice that when there are thoughts of sensual desire, there's just a slightly irritating feeling in, say, your hands or some other part of the body. And you immediately go running off with a thought as a way of getting away from that slight irritation. Sometimes it can be *very* slight. The point of this is to see that a lot of your decisions for thinking about things are arbitrary, and a lot of the sparks that get the mind going are pretty minor.

Then the next question is, when you see something arising, why do you run with it? What's the allure? What do you like about this? And again, you have to watch these things again and again and again, because all too often the allure is something you're not particularly proud of. You don't like to admit to yourself, "Well, I've got these crazy notions about why I would like to think in these ways, or why I *should* be thinking in these ways."

Then you look for the drawbacks and compare them with the allure. All too often, we can think about the drawbacks and not think about the allure, or vice versa. You want to be able to think about them both at the same time so that you can make a real comparison. And when you can see that the action is unnecessary, if the drawbacks outweigh the allure, then you can drop it. This is how we get past things. This is where real discernment lies, seeing that we don't just take the Buddha's teachings as abstractions. They're directions for how we can change the way we act so that we don't have to suffer.

So the question is, how do you apply that right now? Well, it depends on the state of the mind. If the mind finds it easy to settle down, okay, let it settle down. Let it get really solidly based. And then just ask that question: "What's the mind doing right now that's causing a little bit of stress?" You look for the stress to see if it's going up or going down. When it goes up a bit, ask yourself, "What did I do just now? What perception did I hold on to? What feeling

was I focusing on? How was I focusing?” If the mind can’t settle down, you tell yourself, “How can I be patient with this, so that my irritation about the disturbances in my mind doesn’t add more disturbance?”

In other words, try to adjust the teachings to what the state of the mind is, so that you can see clearly what’s going on. And if you can’t see things clearly for the time being, okay, just hold the right questions in mind, because that’ll help sort out a lot of things. Ask questions about actions: “What are you doing?” As for questions about things like “Who am I?” or “What am I?” “Do I exist?” “Do I not exist?” “What’s my relationship to the world outside?”—those are the things you can put aside, because as the Buddha said, the problem is not with what you are or with the world outside or with life in general, the problem is the actions in the mind causing suffering.

And then he teaches you the tools so that you can actually *see* those actions and change your ways. The teachings are there for that purpose, so that you can change your ways, so that you can experience something you never experienced before: the mind totally free of suffering. That’s where all this is aimed. And what’s getting in the way of seeing that? Your ignorance about what you’re doing. So keep your attention focused right here, and discernment is bound to arise.