

For the Cessation of Dukkha

July 9, 2022

Pali has a single word, *dukkha*, that covers a lot of words in English. This can create problems for a translator, but it also created problems for the Buddha, in that he had to distinguish between different kinds of *dukkha*. And he had to combat the tendency to glom them all together. As he said, our basic reaction to *dukkha*—pain, suffering, stress, whether physical pain or mental pain—is bewilderment on the one hand and a search on the other: Is there someone who knows a way or two for the cessation of this *dukkha*, this pain?

When we first asked that question, when we were little children, we were probably thinking primarily of physical pain. But it's glommed together with mental pain. The Buddha's basically offering his teachings as a response to that question, but he refines it. To begin with, he raises the bar. Usually when we're concerned about a pain, bewildered about a pain, it's that particular pain, and all we're thinking about is the cessation of that particular pain.

He's offering something more: a way to stop the suffering from any pains we may have in the present, but also to attain a dimension where there is no possibility of any further pain at all. He also found that strategically it would be important to focus not so much on the physical pain, but on the mental component: both the mental pain and the mental cause of suffering from the pain.

This is where the strategy of the Dhamma as a whole begins. It's why the practice begins with the four noble truths, not with the three characteristics. The simple fact that there are things that arise and pass away that are dependent on conditions, fabrications, and there's a stress inherent in the fact that those things are dependent on conditions and are inconstant.: That's not the beginning of the practice. It's simply a fact that's out there.

The practice begins when you focus instead on a particular type of *dukkha*: the *dukkha* that's the same as clinging and is caused by craving. As you learn how to get past that craving, you're not only putting an end to whatever mental suffering there is around, say, physical pain or other mental pains, but ultimately you also get the mind to a point where it's not creating the conditions for any further fabrications at all. There's a dimension where the senses all grow cold. There's a total unbinding. There's no possibility for pain in there at all.

So the Buddha is taking this very basic question—"Can somebody help me?" is basically is what the question is saying—and he's refining it. It's a social question.

It's because we suffer, because we have pain, that we're actually interested in other beings at all. If we had no pain—if everything were just bliss, bliss, bliss—we probably wouldn't be interested in other people. We'd just be totally consumed by the bliss. But the fact that we have pain causes us to start searching outside. As children, we search for our parents, for help from them. As we grow up, we search for help from other people. And the Buddha's offering himself as the ideal person to give advice on how to help ourselves.

For a lot of us, our search is tainted by the bewilderment that also goes along with pain. The path of practice begins when you get some handle on where the pain is coming from, what the pain is, and what you can do about it. That's right view: the four noble truths.

So that's the beginning of the practice. That's really the beginning of the Dhamma. Everything we do as we practice virtue, concentration, and discernment, developing all the perfections, is based on that understanding. It's because we realize that the pain is mental and the causes of the pain that are mental are the really important ones: That's why we're sitting here meditating.

If the kind of pain that we can put an end to were caused by situations outside, if the strategy involved focusing on the causes outside, we wouldn't be sitting here with our eyes closed. We'd be out there agitating to get things changed outside. But here, the causes are right here. The problem is right here. The solution is right here. The end of the problem is right here. So focus right here.

We get the mind quiet so that we can see the mind. The mind has so many things going on. It's like a corporation: a big building with lots of people. And for the most part, as with any corporation, nobody really knows everything that's going on in the corporation. So things that are important and things that are unimportant all get glommed together. What we're trying to do is get things really, really quiet so that we can see what's important: where the clinging is, where the craving is.

So we get the mind quiet, not just for the sake of the pleasure that comes with the quiet. We're going to be using that pleasure to counterbalance the pleasure we get in the different kinds of craving. So allow your mind to settle in: both to rest and to get ready for work. If you're coming to the meditation frazzled from the day, it can take a lot of time to gain a sense of well-being right here. Breathe in ways it feels good so that it feels good simply inhabiting the body. This is called the pleasure of form.

It's different from the pleasure of sensuality. The pleasure of sensuality depends on things outside being a certain way, but they almost never really correspond to our desires. As the Buddha said, it would have to rain gold coins

and it still wouldn't be enough for our desires. Obviously, though, it's not raining gold coins. Another time, he said that if you took the Himalayan range and you doubled it and turned it all into gold, it still wouldn't be enough for one person's sensual desires. So out there in the world, there's never going to be enough.

So you look for a different kind of pleasure: the pleasure from simply inhabiting the body from within, in such a way that if there's any pleasure that comes from the breath, you allow it to spread through the body. Any pleasure that comes from the way you conceive the breath, let that spread through the body, so that the whole sense of the body is saturated with a sense of well-being.

This is part of the path. It was the first part that the Buddha discovered: right concentration. In other words, he followed right concentration to the point where he understood the four noble truths and fully developed right view. That's when the path was complete. As I said earlier, that's where the Dhamma really began.

So when we're here, we're right on the way. We're in the right spot so that we can develop the sense of well-being that will counteract the causes of suffering. Then we can see those causes more clearly. As the Buddha says, any craving that leads to becoming is going to be a cause for suffering. So you want to notice what little becomings are appearing in the mind.

For the time being, we're working on one big becoming inside, which is the sense of inhabiting the body from within. Anything else, you've got to call into question. All those messages that are sent back and forth in the corporation, all the little spats in the politics of the corporation: You want to catch sight of them to see how they create suffering in the mind.

So everything else that's not related to the breath right now, call it into question. Sometimes calling it into question means simply noticing that the mind might be inclined to go to a particular direction, and you ask, "Why? What's accomplished?" and that's enough to stop it. Other times, it's not enough. Part of the mind feels really inclined to go someplace else.

So you have to reflect on the drawbacks. If you thought that thought, what would it accomplish? Where would it lead you? We have this tendency to be fascinated by all our thoughts, to side with whatever thought comes up in the mind. You have to change the alliances, change your allegiance.

The whole mind is a complex thing. This is why our suffering bewilders us, because it's coming out of a complex cause. But, the Buddha says, you can trace things in such a way that you can get rid of a lot of the complexity. A lot of it comes from a simple lack of discernment and our tendency to glom things

together. He says, when you learn how to see things as separate, that's when the discernment really is doing its work.

So the big separation line right now is between focusing on the breath and focusing on anything else that's not related to the breath. Hold on right here. Try to make your sensation of the breath fill the body as much as you can. If you can't feel the breath in the body or the subtle breath sensations in the body, focus on the sensations you *can* feel. And make them comfortable.

There's a tendency, when reading Ajaan Lee's instructions on breath, to get really fascinated by his descriptions of the breath energies in the body, and to neglect what he has to say about the rhythm of the breath: in long, out long; in short, out short; in short, out long; in long, out short. As he said, the rhythm of the breathing has an effect, and exploring that can occupy you for a whole hour if you want—whatever gets you interested in inhabiting the body from within so that you can change the balance of power inside, to put the mind in a position where it can really do the work, right where the work needs to be done: right here.

So make right here a good place to work. Make things clear inside. After all, everything you need to know is right here. It's simply that we've allowed it to become murky, where everything gets glommed together: physical pain, mental pain; the pain of the three characteristics; the pain of the four noble truths. It's all one big sticky mess in most people's minds.

But when you allow things to settle down inside, you're beginning to give yourself a chance to separate things out so that you can put your finger on the cause and then really do something about it.