

Appropriate Attention

March 5, 2023

The nature of the mind is that it doesn't sit around just doing nothing. It's not simply a passive receiver of outside stimuli. It's out there looking for things. It's constantly active because it knows there are dangers all around. And so the question always in the back of the mind is, "What next? What next? What do I do next? What should I do next?" It's because this is the nature of the mind that the Buddha's basic teachings are about things we should do.

He's giving us the advice we're looking for, as he said, when we first encounter pain in our lives. Think about it: You're a child, newly born. You don't understand language. You come out of the womb and the first thing you do is you cry. There's pain. That's human life: pain coming in, pain going out, and a lot of pain in between. So even before we knew language at all, we knew that there was pain. And even though we hadn't been able to formulate the question or articulate the question, the basic question was: How do we get out of this? As we learned how to articulate our reaction, it came down to two things. One is that we were simply bewildered. And two, is there anyone who knows a way out of this pain? So as I said, the Buddha is offering us answers to those questions.

This is one of the reasons why, even though he wasn't the sort of person to go around picking fights with people, if there were people who said that the things you do in the present moment can't make any difference in what you're experiencing in the present moment, he would go and argue with them. He'd ask them first, "Do you really teach this?" Some people would say that what you experience right now is totally shaped by past kamma. Others would say that it's determined by some creator god. And others would say, "Well, there's no real cause for it all. It just happens that way. Nothing you can do about it." The Buddha said that if you teach these things, you're leaving people bewildered. They'll have no basis for deciding what should and shouldn't be done, which, he said, was the teacher's main responsibility—both to ensure you that, yes, what you do does make a difference, and so your question of what should and shouldn't be done is a good question.

Then he offers answers: the two categorical teachings that they call *ekamsa dhamma* in Pali. The first is that unskillful action should be abandoned, skillful actions should be developed. These include actions in thought, word, and deed. So that there are some shoulds there. The other categorical teaching builds on that: the four noble truths. Craving, the second truth, is an unskillful action. The noble

eightfold path, the fourth truth, is a skillful way of acting. And here, too, there are shoulds. Each truth is not just something to sit around and talk about. Suffering, the first noble truth, is to be comprehended to the point where you have dispassion for it. The second noble truth, craving, is to be abandoned. The third noble truth, the cessation of suffering, is to be realized. And the fourth noble truth, the way to the cessation of suffering, is to be developed.

So the Buddha here is giving you some shoulds. When you sit here and wonder, “What should I do next, what should I do next?” well, look at what you’ve got. He tells you both the shoulds and also the places to focus your attention. When you have a sense that you’re suffering, he doesn’t simply say that there is suffering. He says that suffering is something that you’re doing. You’re clinging to the five aggregates of form, feeling, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness. And why are you doing that? Because of craving.

Now, that right there is pretty radical. Most of us, when we suffer, tend to focus on the causes coming from outside. This person did that, that person did this, the society’s like this, the weather’s like that. But as Ajaan Lee says, those things are just the shadows of suffering. The real suffering is the clinging inside. So the Buddha’s focusing your attention inside. The same with the cause and the same with the suffering itself: It’s all happening inside here.

As it turns out, the solution is also found inside. You take those same five things that, when you cling to them, constitute suffering, and you can turn them into the path. Like right now as we’re sitting here meditating: You’re focusing on the breath—that’s form, the form of the body. You’re creating a feeling of well-being by the way you focus on the breath: not too long, not too short, not too heavy, not too light. Just right. You have a perception that you hold in mind as to where the breath is coming in, where the breath is going out, how it moves through the body. As for fabrication, you talk to yourself in the beginning about how to get the mind and the breath to fit together snugly: the adjustment work you have to do. Technically, that’s called directed thought and evaluation. And then finally consciousness. You’re aware of these things right here.

What you’re doing is you’re taking these things that you normally cling to and carry around, and you’re turning them into a path. It’s as if you have a load of bricks over your shoulders, but instead of carrying them around on your shoulders, you put them down and use the bricks to pave a path that you can walk on.

Or in the Buddha’s image, you have to cross over a river. This side of the river is dangerous. The other side of the river is safe. But there’s no bridge and no regular boat going back and forth. So you have to make a raft. What do you do?

Where do you get the materials for the raft? From this side of the river. The trees have twigs and branches and leaves. Okay, you cut those and then you tie them together in the right way. Then you hold on to that raft as you swim across the water. When you get to the other side, you can let the raft go because you've reached safety. You don't need to carry it around on your head. But to get there, you have to take what you've got right here, right now, on this side of the river and turn it into a path.

Now, to think in these ways is called appropriate attention. In other words, the Buddha gives you a list of things that are appropriate to pay attention to in the present moment: Pay attention to your clinging, pay attention to your craving. Pay attention to the things you can do to put an end to the clinging and craving. And not only pay attention, remember what your duties are. We read about people in the time of the Buddha who listened to his Dhamma and gained awakening just listening to the talk and we wonder, "Why is it that they just listen to a talk and are able to get an awakening? We've listened to many talks, yet we don't gain awakening."

Well, the answer is they didn't just listen. As the Buddha said, they developed five qualities inside. The first three of the qualities have to do with respect. You don't look down on the person giving the talk, you don't look down on the Dhamma he's talking about, and then three, you don't look down on yourself. In other words, when the speaker talks about things like the noble truths, the duties and noble truths, you're capable of doing these things.

If you have that conviction, the normal reaction will be then to look inside and see how the Dhamma talk applies to what you're doing right now. That's where the appropriate attention comes in. You listen to a Dhamma talk and ask yourself: How is it related to the suffering you're creating right now? How is it related to the cause of suffering you're creating right now? What advice is it giving you to change your actions so that they actually put an end to suffering? When you think in those ways, pay attention to the present moment in those ways, that's appropriate attention. When you listen to a Dhamma talk, that's where you pay attention: inside.

And finally, the fifth quality is that you're single-minded. You don't let your mind wander away. You stay right here, listening to the Dhamma, seeing how it applies inside. If it doesn't apply inside, just let it go.

When people who, in the time of the Buddha, listened to the Dhamma and were able to get awakening, it was because they were doing these things. And these are things that we should all do. It's because of this, the Buddha said, that the

internal quality that's most conducive to awakening is this quality of appropriate attention.

Now, notice: This is *appropriate* attention. It's not just bare attention. We hear so much about Buddhist meditation promotes bare attention or bare awareness, but the Buddha never used those terms. When he talks about the act of attention, he says there are two kinds. There's appropriate and inappropriate. Appropriate attention is framed in terms of those categorical teachings, either what you should do to abandon unskillful actions and what you should do to develop skillful actions, or what you should do to carry out the duties of the four noble truths.

The Buddha takes this tendency that the mind has to approach experience in an active way and he's giving you instructions in how to use that tendency of the mind to your advantage. If we have this active tendency of the mind but we do it in ignorance, it's going to cause suffering. But if we do it with knowledge, it can lead to the end of suffering. So this is what he's providing us: the right kind of knowledge. He's providing us points to examine, directing our attention to the right place, giving us a vocabulary, giving us instructions for how to do this, how to do that, in the most effective way to put an end to suffering.

His teachings on kamma, which sometimes seem far away in dealing with past lives and future lives, are also relevant here, too. As I mentioned, he said that what you do right now can have an impact on what you're experiencing right now. Your kamma coming in from the past is raw materials: the twigs and the branches. But what you're doing right now makes a difference between whether the twigs and the branches just sit there on this side of the river or whether you tie them together and make them into a raft.

Or worse than just sitting here, the worst thing, of course, is piling them up on your shoulder and carrying them around. You have the choice. When the Buddha points out that "Yes, your actions in the present moment, your thoughts, your intentions in the present moment do make a difference," he's giving you a real basis for deciding, that there is such a thing as what should be done and what shouldn't be done. As he says, if you have a teaching that doesn't even give you a basis for having the concept of what should and shouldn't be done, you're still left bewildered the way you were when you were a little child. Especially when you're told there's nothing you can do, it makes you totally helpless. But when you realize that there are things you can do and they do make a difference, that empowers you.

On top of that, he tells you the best things to do. This is his gift as a teacher to you: providing for your protection, ending your bewilderment, and answering

that question, “Is there someone who knows a way to put an end to the suffering?”
There is, and this is how it’s done. Now it’s up to you to do it.