

## *Respect for Suffering*

*August 2003*

The Buddha once said he taught only two things: suffering and the end of suffering. So when we study the Buddha's Dhamma, that's what we're studying: how we're suffering and how to put an end to it.

He said there are four truths you have to know about suffering. In fact, that was his first teaching: know what suffering is, what its cause is, know that you can put an end to suffering, and then how to do it.

So that's what we're doing right now: learning how to put an end to suffering. As we practice meditation, we're practicing part of the path: right mindfulness, right concentration. So what we're doing right now is a noble truth. Remind yourself of that.

And when you find pain and suffering coming up in the practice, remember that that's a noble truth as well, something really worthy of respect.

How do you respect suffering? You give it some space. As when you respect an enemy: You can't be careless in trying to fight the enemy. You have to do your best. With suffering, you know that you can't just jump right in to push it away. If you're going to put an end to it, you have to do it systematically. And an important step in our system is to give the mind a place to settle down. Once you understand what we're doing here, try to bring the mind into the present moment.

And develop the good qualities you're going to need in order to deal with the suffering. You find that craving and ignorance are actually part of the problem, so try to get rid of those. Qualities like mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment, though, are the things that will help you comprehend suffering. So try to strengthen those as much as you can.

Once they're strong, then we can really look into the issue of why the mind is creating unnecessary suffering for itself.

So our first issue is to develop mindfulness and concentration. Mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind. Keep the breath in mind, or if you have a meditation word like *buddho*, you can keep that in mind. Or if you want to visualize something, you can visualize the bones in your body, something that's right here right now.

Because where and when does suffering happen? It happens right here right now. Where's it going to be cured? It's going to be cured right here right now. So you want to get used to being right here right now, not running off after your thoughts in other directions.

Actually, awareness is always right here right now. It's a question of where

its focus goes. Sometimes the focus goes into thought-constructs: You think about your next meal, you think about home, you think about school, you think about work. Your awareness is still here but the focus is off someplace else. What you want to do is bring your focus back to your awareness, what you've got going right here right now. You've got the breath coming in, going out, and you've got the mind commenting on it. Try to keep those things together.

If the mind is going to start commenting on other things, don't pay any attention to it. Bring it right back here right now. Try to be alert to what's going on.

You can't be complacent. Because the mind has a tendency: its old habit of running off, running off, running off. And for the most part, we're willing to run along with it. But now we're going to change the rules. If thoughts run off, we don't have to go running after them.

Stay right here with your basic awareness focused on the breath coming in, the breath going out. This develops two of the main qualities that are important for developing a real foundation of mindfulness, a really solid frame of reference: mindfulness and alertness.

The third quality is ardency, being ardent in your mindfulness and ardent in your alertness.

Ardent in your mindfulness means that you don't want to leave any gaps. Just keep reminding yourself of the breath over and over and over again. If you're working with the meditation word, *buddho*, just think, *buddho*, *buddho*. Don't let there be any gaps. If you catch yourself slipping off, bring your mind right back. Remind yourself: You've got to be here with the breath. You're here because there's work to be done. If you don't do the work, who's going to do it? Nobody else can do it for you. And if you don't do the work now, when is it going to get done?

So keep coming back, coming back, coming back as quickly as you can. Get to the point where you can catch the mind before it goes, when it seems to be leaning out after something. When you catch it leaning out, just bring it back. Set it up straight again. Don't wait until it's already jumped over to the next thought or the next object.

That's when you can say you're really ardent in your mindfulness.

Ardent in your alertness means being very sensitive to you're doing right now, particularly when you're with the breath. Try to be really sensitive to the breath coming in, going out. How does it feel? How does it feel in different parts of the body? There are lots of parts of the body that we tend to block out of our awareness. We try to open up those different parts of the body because that will open up our awareness. How does the breathing feel in your head? How does the breathing feel in your chest? How does it feel in your abdomen,

your legs, your arms, your fingers, your toes?

Remember: Breathing is a whole-body process. It engages the entire nervous system. Or it should. Sometimes it gets blocked. When it gets blocked, then it's a cause for diseases to slip in. So try to keep the breath energy open all the way down through the body.

The more sensitive you can be to any of the slightest bit of discomfort in the breath, the better. If there's a slight bit of discomfort, you can change things: change the rhythm of your breathing, change the depth of your breathing, whether it's narrow or broad, heavy or light. There are lots of ways you can adjust the breath. We've got all these adjustments on this mp3 recorder right here. Well, your breath has lots more ways of being adjusted. So there's a lot to play with.

Now the word, "play," here is important. If the present moment gets boring, you're not going to stay here. But realize there's a lot you can do here. Fool around with the dials. See what kind of breath sensations you really like to emphasize.

And then notice what works and what doesn't work. In other words, some things may feel good for a while but after a while they begin to wear on you, so you've got to change. Find a rhythm that feels good for as long as possible. Or if you suddenly find that the body's needs change, change the breath as quickly as you can. This is all an aspect of being ardently alert.

When you're ardently mindful and ardently alert, these qualities grow. It's like exercising. You push yourself a little bit more, a little bit more, a little bit more, and you find that the good things you want to see developed in the mind start growing.

The qualities of mindfulness and alertness turn into basic elements of right concentration: directed thought and evaluation, where you keep your mind focused on an object and are very careful and very clear about how it feels, what you can do with that sensation. In other words, if there's a good breath sensation in one part of the body, you can spread it. Think of it running down the whole nervous system. Think of all the different nerves in your body and do what you can to let them all have that same feeling tone.

Once everything opens up inside like that, then allow it to stay that way. Show some respect for your concentration.

After all, concentration is a noble truth. It's the heart of the path. Once your concentration is solid, then you're ready to delve into the issue of why there is suffering in the mind. In other words, you come at it with respect. You realize that this is a very complicated issue. It's going to require a lot of concentration, a lot of mindfulness, a lot of discernment in order to understand it, so you've prepared yourself to really do all the necessary work.

Because there are two kinds of *dukkha* or suffering.

One is just the natural ways things are. You've got a body and there's going to be pain in your body, there's going to be aging, illness, death someday. Those are things you can't prevent.

But there's another kind of suffering that you cause through your own craving. You have to be clear on the distinction between the two. Because the second kind of suffering is the suffering you *can* change, that you can put an end to. And when you put an end to that, then the suffering or the stress of having a body doesn't impinge on the mind. The stress of all your thoughts and feelings and other mental activity won't impinge on the mind, either.

So you've got to be very careful about looking at what you're doing that's adding unnecessary stress to the present moment. That's the basic question.

And the real suffering comes down to what the Buddha calls "clinging." You hold onto things in hopes that you're going to get happiness out of them when they don't have true happiness to give you. They may give you some pleasure, but it's not long-lasting. And if you hope that your true and deepest happiness depends on those things, you're setting yourself up for a fall.

So instead, you try to depend on your concentration, depend on your mindfulness so that they can help develop discernment that helps you see through these things, understanding the things that you're latching onto. It'll teach you that you can't depend on them for permanent happiness but you can use them as tools. You can use them as utensils for understanding the mind, for developing more and more solid bases inside in terms of the path.

Ultimately, your discernment gets so clear that it opens up to something very different inside. It's like a different dimension—a dimension where nothing changes, nothing comes, nothing goes, but there's awareness. You're aware of that dimension. And you realize that in that dimension there's no stress, there's no suffering. It's right here, it can be touched here in the present moment. But the present moment is covering it up because we're doing so many things in the present moment.

And so as we meditate, we try to strip away all the excess doing right here that's causing us stress, that's causing us suffering, the kind of suffering that comes from craving and ignorance. You can undo it not by ordering yourself to undo it but by looking at the things you crave and realizing that they're not worth craving; looking at the things that you're ignorant about and learning to see them more and more clearly.

It's by cutting through the craving and ignorance that the Buddha said you can put an end to suffering. And you come to realize that what the Buddha taught was true: There really is an end to suffering, there is this dimension of experience where there is no suffering at all.

So as we're practicing here, remind yourself of why the Buddha taught us to meditate: to understand suffering and to understand how to put an end to it.

Other issues, he said, are beside the point. Now, you will find that other issues come up in your meditation. You may start getting intuitions of this or visions of that, but that's not what the meditation is for, that's not why the Buddha was teaching. He was teaching two things: suffering and the end of suffering.

And if we keep our sights set on those two things as we meditate, then we find that we get the best possible results. After all, the Buddha saw that when you concentrate the mind, you can use it for all kinds of things but the absolute best thing you can use it for is to answer this question: how to put an end to suffering. Because when there's an end to suffering, there are no more issues in life. Nothing else is a problem.

So by focusing on this one issue, he takes care of everything else.