

One Thing Only

November 3, 2013

There's a fake Buddha quote you may have heard. It quotes the Buddha as saying, "I teach one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering." The fake part is "the one thing and one thing only." He did say, "All I teach is suffering and the end of suffering." But people tend to focus on the "one thing only."

I've read some teachers interpret this, saying that there's a subtle teaching here: that suffering and the end of suffering are the same thing. From there, they go on to say, "What it means is that if you learn to accept the fact of suffering, then there's no more suffering," which is a pretty bleak teaching. It goes together with a One Method and One Method Only teaching, i.e., that the basic teaching is simply watching things arising and passing away, and that's all you have to do. Learn not to get involved, and everything will be okay. That's the highest happiness you can expect.

Again, the Buddha didn't teach that. Suffering is one thing; the end of suffering is something else. And they both come from actions—different actions—which makes all the difference in the world. If there's only one thing to do, such as just passively accepting whatever's going on, then you're let off the hook. There wouldn't be a need for very much discernment to go into the path because there wouldn't be many choices made. In fact, you'd be learning how not to make choices—trying to develop choiceless awareness.

But the fact is that you're making choices all the time, and what you're experiencing right now is the result of choices you've made in the past plus choices you're making right now. A major part of the path is learning how to accept that fact and then to work with it—to do something positive with it. In other words, if there's suffering right now, you've been making some bad choices in the past, and you're making some bad choices right now. If you weren't making bad choices right now, there wouldn't be any suffering. So wherever there's any stress, dukkha in any of its forms, you've got to look into what you're doing. But you can change what you're doing, and shape a different present: That's the positive point.

Now, because what you're experiencing right now is a combination of different factors, that means you have to look and look again. Those pleasures and pains don't come marked with a country of origin, i.e., past kamma or present kamma. A large part of the meditation is learning how to sort that out: which things are coming from past intentions and which things are coming from present intentions. And what are your present intentions right now? This throws all the responsibility on you. The teacher's here to give advice, to see if you're going off course, and to help with a little course correction. But then again, you have to be responsible for deciding whether you want to take the advice or not.

This is the hard part of the path, and it's one of the reasons why people like to hear that there's a One-Size-Fits-All meditation method, and the method itself has just one technique. It takes the responsibility off their shoulders. But you're not going to gain discernment that way. You gain discernment from making choices and then learning how to read them. It's not the case that you'll go immediately to total understanding of what's the past kamma you're experiencing right now and what's the present kamma. You learn bit by bit.

Try to get the mind as still as possible. This is the basic pattern in all the tetrads of the breath meditation. You sensitize yourself to what you're doing, and then you try to do it in a way that leads to more calm, to more subtle forms of concentration and more subtle levels of pleasure. You work through this process of sensitizing and refinement step by step by step, which means that you have to be very observant. The Buddha gives you some guidance. If you notice that things are inconstant in the mind, especially if the level of stress or ease in the mind is inconstant, look at what you're doing. When the level of stress goes up, what did you do? When it goes down, what did you do? When things seem to be perfectly still and perfectly at ease, try to maintain that stillness as a baseline, to see if you can begin to sensitize yourself to more subtle ups and downs.

This keeps throwing the responsibility back on you. The Buddha's there with guidance. He gives you lots of different meditation methods to deal with specific problems as they come up. Breath meditation is your home base because that's the method that sensitizes you directly to bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication and points you in the direction of learning how to calm these things.

But sometimes issues come up in the mind that are a lot more blatant than that. That's when you need contemplation of the body, contemplation of death, contemplation of the principle of kamma, reflections on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. All of these things are there to help you with whatever the specific problem that's coming up, whether it's laziness or lack of self-confidence. There are ways of thinking that can get you around those problems, all with the purpose of getting you back to the breath—because it's when you're with the breath that you can see your subtle intentions most clearly.

Those intentions are the troublemakers. Those are the things you want to see more and more clearly, so you can figure out exactly where you're making choices right now, and who, in the bureaucracy of your mind, is making the choice. Sometimes decisions get sent up to the top, and you realize that there's an issue you have to deal with. But there are a lot of lower-level management people who will make quick decisions and send things back down again without consulting you. If there weren't, your mind would be totally flooded with all kinds of trivial stuff. The problem is, though, that some of those middle-level decisions are not really trivial and not very wise. So you've got to get the mind more and more still to see where the subtle decisions are being made and if they're actually in your best interest.

So suffering is not the same thing as the end of suffering. The Buddha didn't teach just one thing; he didn't teach just one method. The mind, after all, is a complex thing, and you need a full repertoire of approaches to work with it. Which is why we need all this time to meditate: to get to know things, to stick with something for a while until you can see where you're doing it wrong. Then you can do a course correction.

So, accept the fact that there will be some right and some wrong in what you're doing all the time. You have to approach this with a certain amount of humility. Okay, yup, you are doing something wrong. But you've also got some rightness, and a lot of the practice is learning to figure out which is which, so that you can increase the rightness. It will be up to you to make the distinction, because when awakening comes, nobody else does it for you. That's a matter of your powers of observation, your discernment, and your sensitivity to the choices the mind is making. And this gets more subtle with practice, as you take on the responsibility.

You say, "Okay, there's suffering there, I know. I'm not going to blame anybody else." But blaming yourself doesn't mean that you're a bad person—simply that there's been a lack of skill and that's something that can be corrected. This will take time; it requires patience. Just as the Buddha said, to get to know someone well, you have to spend time with that person and be with them in lots of different situations to get a rounded view. The same principle applies to your mind. To get a rounded view of what's going on in your mind—where there's suffering and stress, and what's causing it—you have to spend time with it and be continually observant.

And remember that responsibility lies here. You are making choices. You've made some bad ones, but you've also made some good ones. And you want to be able to learn from both so that you can recognize the difference between the causes of suffering and the path to its end.