

The Gift of Discernment

September 11, 2013

When we think of the Buddha's compassion, the first teaching that comes to mind is often the brahmaviharas, in which he teaches us to develop goodwill for all beings, compassion for all who are suffering, empathetic joy for all who are happy, and equanimity so that these other three qualities don't cause us to suffer from all the suffering in the world.

But the first thing the Buddha wanted to talk about—what, for him was the most important part of his teaching—was discernment. He provided us with admirable friendship so that we would be inspired to adopt what he thought was the most important internal factor, which was appropriate attention: applying discernment to the present moment.

In his first sermon, he starts out with the important takeaway, which is right view—learning how to see things in terms of suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation, realizing that there are duties that are appropriate to each. He's giving you guidance. As he said elsewhere, a teaching that doesn't give you guidance as to what should and shouldn't be done leaves you bewildered and unprotected.

So the four noble truths, which are the categories of appropriate attention, are the Buddha's protection. Those are your guide to make sure that wherever you go, whatever you do, you're not bewildered. You have a sense of what you should do, because the mind, after all, is an active faculty. It doesn't just sit here passively receiving things. Raw material comes in, and you shape it. As long as the mind is going to be active, that's its primary need: knowing how to shape things properly.

The Buddha can't change what raw material we've generated from the past, but he *can* teach us how to reshape things. That's what keeps us from being bewildered. That's our protection, which is why appropriate attention, as opposed to bare attention, is *the* essential factor as you go through life. Now, there are times when you simply try to notice what's happening. But there are other times when you realize you've got to shape things so that you won't suffer. You're not stuck with whatever's coming up.

I was talking with someone today who was complaining that both he and his wife had been attending a lot of Buddhist retreats and they'd started using Buddhist teachings in their arguments with each other. Two nights ago, after they'd had a pact not to argue after 10 pm, here it was midnight and they were arguing. He asked her, "Can't we put this off to some other time?" And she said,

“Look, this is what’s happening right now. You’ve got to accept what’s happening right now.” That’s not what the Buddha would have said. Some things you accept; other things you change.

And one of the things you’ve got to accept is the fact that you can change things.

So you always want to look to the Buddha’s teachings for guidance on what to do. His compassion for you is the guidance he gives as to how to decide what to do and what not to do. When suffering comes, you try to comprehend it. What does it mean to comprehend suffering? Try to take it apart in terms of the five clinging-aggregates. What are you holding onto in terms of the form, whatever forms there may be in your experience right now? What are you holding onto in terms of feelings, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness? How are you holding on? Why do you hold on? What’s the allure? When you see the allure, then you want to see the drawbacks of holding on like that.

That’s how you develop dispassion and disenchantment, and that’s what it means to comprehend these things. You see them so thoroughly that they lose their appeal. It’s like playing tic-tac-toe until you’ve figured out all the possible moves and realize there wasn’t that much to the game to begin with. Then you move on to a better use of your time.

All the things you’re hanging onto: It’s because there’s something in there that you really like. That’s why we hang onto what actually is suffering. It may be an idea we have about ourselves, an idea we have about how the world should be, or how other people should be. And the idea may be right, but our holding onto it is making us suffer. So that’s the sign there’s something wrong in there.

So as Ajaan Lee says, you’re going to have to get to the point where you stop hanging onto your rightness. That doesn’t mean you stop trying to *do* what’s right. But there are certain ways of being right or of insisting on your rightness that actually cause suffering, so you’ve got to watch out for them.

You want to see what the craving is. What are you trying to get out of the things that you’re holding onto? What are you thirsting for? What do you think they’ll provide you with? When you see that they won’t provide you with that, that’s when you begin to let go of them. And to see that clearly, you’ve got to get the mind concentrated so that it can see the subtle movements inside and, at the same time, not have such an overriding sense of hunger all the time.

Try to feed off virtue. Try to feed off concentration. Feed off all the factors of the path—concentration in particular. That’s where you can get a sense of inner nourishment. But it also steadies the mind so that when thoughts move in one direction or another, you know. Then you begin to see that what you used to

think was simply watching things arising and passing away on their own was not the case at all. They weren't doing it just on their own. You were very much involved.

The more sensitive you get to the way you shape things, the better you can get at it. You can create really refined states of well-being this way. And then you can use the skills you develop in concentration to deal with other issues as they come in the course of the day because, after all, the fabrications that you use to create that state of concentration are the same fabrications with which you can create greed or anger or fear or anxiety, jealousy—whatever unskillful states there are. They're basically the same processes.

The whole purpose of this practice is to get reflective, and that's what right view is. That's what appropriate attention is. You watch yourself in action. You turn around and look at what you're doing.

When I was in school studying history, one of the most fascinating things was to read writers writing about writing, or thinkers thinking about thinking: in other words, to see how they reflected on their own activities. Often it was much more interesting than the normal subjects they thought about or wrote about because it was closest to home. Those were the things they could really observe directly.

Now as a meditator, you want to get fascinated in how your mind works, how it creates things and how it shapes things. You do this by trying to do it skillfully, and then you observe: What makes one state more skillful than another? What makes one mental skill more appropriate than another? These are things you can see in action because the questioning and the thinking that are involved in appropriate attention are mainly aimed at what you're doing right now. They're not meant to get discursive, thinking back to last year or the last decade or your childhood or whatever. They're meant to notice what you're doing right now and to ask questions about it, the big question being: Is this the way I should be doing this?

You think about the Buddha's instructions, and you also think about what your own experience is: Is this actually getting me the happiness I want? Think about the Buddha on his quest for awakening. The major turning points came when he stopped to reflect on what he was doing and the results he was getting. He realized, "Okay, things are not going the way I wanted them to. This practice is not getting the results I want. What else could I do?" It was that self-reflective quality that made all the difference.

This is why, as a meditator, you have to be constantly self-reflective—and that's what appropriate attention is. It keeps focusing you back on your actions

and the results you're getting from them. This is what the four noble truths are all about. You're suffering? You can't blame it on the weather. You can't blame it on the economy. You can't blame it on the political structure. Those things may be miserable, but you don't have to be miserable because of them. It's what you're doing right now.

Now, this is not blaming the victim. It's giving you the power to change the fact that you may be suffering right now and reminds you that you don't have to be anybody's victim, that *the* important element—i.e., the extent to which you're suffering over things: That's under your control. Or you can bring it under your control.

This is why this self-reflective ability is so important. It's what makes or breaks a meditator.

You find there are things about yourself you don't like to look at? You tell yourself, "I've got to look at these things." You figure out how to strengthen your resolve and strengthen your concentration so that you're stable enough to look at the things and not get blown away.

So it's by getting you to focus your attention inside, on the activities of the mind, having the mind watch its own activities: That was the Buddha's gift. That was his primary expression of compassion so that you *can* look after yourself with ease.