

Suffering Is a Feeding Addiction

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The way the Buddha describes our sufferings, they're like a feeding addiction. We feed on pleasures, whether physical pleasures or emotional pleasures. We cling to these things. And clinging itself is a kind of feeding. So to treat the problem of suffering, we have to treat it the way we'd treat any other addiction. One, we have to realize that it's bad for us. That's what right view is all about. There are lots of things we feed on that we think are good, but the Buddha points out that if you really look at the process of feeding very carefully, you'll see that it involves a lot of stress and a lot of suffering. And it's possible to know that and yet still keep going back and going back, going back. This is why we need the other factors of the path.

Right view does the work, but it needs the strengthening of the other factors, particularly right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

When the Buddha defines right effort, it's a matter of desiring to give rise to what's skillful and to do away with what's not. You really have to *want* that. In other words, you could know that something is harmful, but you like it anyhow, so you resist changing your habits. But if you look at it long enough and carefully enough, to the point where you have that desire to get rid of it, that's a lot of the battle right there.

So when you're sitting down to meditate and you find that your motivation is weak, you might take a while to stop and remind yourself of why meditation is a good thing, why your mind needs to be trained: all the suffering it can bring onto itself if it's not trained, and the good things that happen when it is trained. However you find that you're able to motivate yourself, use that. That kind of desire is a good thing.

As for right mindfulness, there's a lot of misunderstanding about mindfulness. Many people think it means just being aware of things or being non-reactive, being accepting of whatever comes up. The Buddha never defines it that way. For him, mindfulness is a faculty of the memory. It's your ability to keep things in mind and apply them to what you're doing.

We chanted just now that there are three qualities in right mindfulness: mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Alertness is your ability to see what you're doing here in the present moment and the results that come from your actions. This means you have to be quick. There's a Thai phrase, *ruu than*, which means literally to know in time. In other words, your knowledge is equal to what's happening. You can see things happening as they're happening and not five

minutes, ten minutes later. After all, to deal with issues in your mind, you have to be right there, on top of things.

Mindfulness then is what reminds you what should be done with what comes up. If a skillful quality is coming up, how do you nurture it? How do you protect it? You've got your mind on the breath right now. How do you protect that, that awareness of the breath, from all the other pushes and pulls in your mind and all the different committee members who tell you, "Now's a good time. You've got a whole hour free, you could think about whatever." How do you protect the mind? If you've had some experience with meditating, you can remember things you've done in the past that helped you to shed those thoughts. If you've read something about meditation, bring your memory of what you've read to bear on what you're doing right now. That's mindfulness.

Ardency is when you actually do the work. This is what brings right effort into the practice. You remind yourself of why you want to do the work and the good things that come from doing the work. This ability to keep yourself motivated is an essential part of the practice. Years back, I was going through some books of Ajaan Maha Boowa's Dhamma talks, choosing talks to translate into English. I kept noticing how many of the talks were basically talks of encouragement, pep talks. He challenged the monks, either criticizing them in such a way to make them develop some fighting spirit or encouraging them that they had the ability to work at the practice. In the same way, sometimes you'll find that you have to give yourself a stick and sometimes you give yourself a carrot. That's part of your ardency.

Ajaan Lee identifies this as the wisdom faculty in mindfulness practice. In other words, simply knowing things is not enough. The wise person actually takes good knowledge and puts it to use. But to do that requires strength, because often our feeding addictions, or whatever our addictions may be, are at their strongest when we're feeling weak and tired. That's when the unskillful members of the committee crowd in and say, "Look, you're tired right now. You can't do the practice. But we've got this other pleasure for you here that's really quick and easy." This is why we need right concentration to strengthen our ability to withstand those voices, because it involves working on a way of breathing that feels good.

You're exploring your body from within—your immediate sense of the body as you feel it. And how well do you relate to that sense of the body? Are you on good terms with it? Are you on good terms with your neck? Are you on good terms with your head? Your chest? All the different parts of the body? Try to be friends with them. A lot of that means, when you breathe in, how do you let the

energy flow? Do you squeeze it in a direction that's painful or stressful or tight or tense? Try to picture the breath energy in different ways, ways that are bathing the whole body, so that it feels really good just being here with the breath coming in and out. Think of all the little cells in the body that need a little breath energy and provide it for all of them. They're all clamoring for energy. And here it is. Here it comes. So don't squeeze it off. Don't constrict it. If you're on good terms with your body, then even when the body is weak, you'll have a source of energy just simply through the way you breathe.

It helps to strengthen your realization that there are times, yes, when you're tired and you're feeling a little bit frazzled, but that doesn't mean you have to go back to your old feeding habits. You can stay right here. And it's okay. It may not be ideal, but it's okay. You know that if you stay with the breath long enough, it'll soothe the body, strengthen the body. But you've got to protect this.

This is why mindfulness and concentration go together. The Buddha never talked about them as being two radically separate practices. This is one of the major misunderstandings that you often hear. For him, the practice of mindfulness is what you're doing to get the mind concentrated. It's simply a matter of getting more and more deeply into it; more established at it; more solid at it. At the same time, the qualities of alertness and ardency protect your concentration.

We talked about knowing in time. This is what alertness has to do. And concentration can help with that in two senses. One is because the mind is getting more and more quiet, and you're right here. You can detect the little things going on in the mind much more easily. Two, you're going to need practice in not following your distractions.

This is one of the most common problems everybody encounters. You sit down to meditate and all of a sudden you find yourself someplace else, and you don't know how you got there. You're supposed to be focusing on your breath, but suddenly you find yourself mulling over something that happened three or four months ago. Well, you drop that. Come back to the breath. And each time you come back, don't berate yourself. Just reward yourself with a good breath so that it feels good to come back. But be alert. The mind is going to go wander off again. You can't be the type of addict who says, "Okay, I've given up that bad habit, and it's never going to happen again. I'm going to be solid and sure and never change." You're just setting yourself up for a fall. You've got to realize: Okay, there will be a tendency to go back to, if not that distraction, then something else.

So you have to be alert to detect the warning signs that the mind is about to leave the breath: Part of the mind is with the breath, but another part is scouting around, looking for something else. If you detect that happening, then you can make the breath much more gratifying, much more enveloping, so that the part that was looking for someplace else to go comes back and latches on to the breath again.

The more quickly you can see the processes of how you get distracted, the more you'll be up on what's going on in the mind, the little choices that are being made by the lower members of the bureaucracy, the ones who tend to hide out and work behind the scenes. The fact that you're quiet enables you to see their conversations more clearly. They do send emails to one another. They're very quick, very short, but if you can see them in time, you can cut off the email and say, "Nope, we're not going there."

It's not the case that when you're in right concentration that you're totally oblivious to things. Sounds are still there in the background. Thoughts may flit around the edges of your awareness. The question is whether you're going to go after them or not. When you're really solidly in the concentration, you're not really interested in anything else.

But it's not the case that you're dead to everything. As you're more quiet, you're actually quicker to see things. This is how concentration helps your discernment. It helps you to know in time, to see in time, to be up on what's going on in the mind. Then you can use right view: knowledge about what's a cause of stress and what's part of the path to the end of stress. You can apply it to whatever's coming up. Mindfulness reminds you, and right effort is what does the work. As the Buddha said, these three qualities tend to circle around every factor of the path: right view, right mindfulness, and right effort.

But it's getting the mind into concentration that gives you the strength to carry the work through. In one of the Buddha's analogies, he compares concentration to food for soldiers in a fortress. The soldiers stand for right effort. Mindfulness stands for the gatekeeper of the fortress, trying to make sure that enemy people don't get in. In other words, it recognizes what's skillful and what's unskillful; keeps the unskillful things out; lets the skillful ones in. So mindfulness has to be choosy. It's not just accepting whatever happens. It just has to remember: Who's the enemy and who's the friend? And when you recognize the friend, how do you treat the friend? When you recognize the enemy, how do you treat the enemy? This the work that mindfulness does there. The weapons of the soldiers are the Dhamma you've learned. And the wall of the fortress, which is covered with plaster in such a way that the enemy can't get any handholds or

footholds on the plaster: That's your discernment. But for the soldiers and the mindfulness to have the strength they need to do their work, they need the food of concentration. Without that food, you can have the knowledge and you can have the memory, but you just can't follow through. Your strength isn't up to it. So, strengthen yourself with the concentration. This is a kind of feeding that's part of the path.

Eventually, you want to get the mind to a point where it doesn't need to feed anymore. But to get there, you've got to feed it well. As with any food addiction, it's not that you're trying to starve yourself entirely. You simply learn how to eat in better ways.

So look at your mind. What kinds of things does it tend to feed on—things that are bad for it? And then learn how to feed it instead with the ability to get the mind concentrated to work with the breath energy so that it really does feel nourishing and sustaining; it feels good being right here, breathing in, breathing out. All of the parts of the body that need breath energy are getting the breath energy they need. Gradually, they get more and more full of energy. They get more charged with the energy.

You want it to be just right so that it's not getting frenetic. If it feels like there's too much energy welling up in the body, just think of it dispersing out: out through the pores of the skin, out through the palms of your hands, out through the soles of your feet, out through your eyes, whatever. But when the energy is just right, it gives you a lot of strength.

When you have that strength, then the temptation to go back and feed in your old unskillful ways gets less and less and less. You see more clearly what led you to fall for that kind of feeding. And now you've got something better. There are better ways to feed the mind. You can feed it off generosity. You can feed it off virtue. You can feed it off concentration—all the good things that the Buddha set out in the path. This is why the path is an eightfold path. It requires all eight factors for it to do its work.