

The Practice of Right View

April 22, 2009

When there's a talk during meditation, don't focus your attention on the talk. Focus on your breath. The purpose of the talk is to act like a fence, to catch you when you wander away from the breath, to keep pointing you back to the breath. Because it's right at this spot—where the mind and the body meet at the breath here in the present moment—that your practice takes place. That's where you're going to see all the things you need to see, and do all the things you need to do in the practice. The talk is to help keep you focused here and to give you some perspective on what you're supposed to be looking for, what you're supposed to be doing.

Last year I received a phone call from someone who was doing a thesis on using Buddhist teachings and practices in the workplace. He wanted to ask me some questions as part of his thesis. One of the things that bothered me about his questions was that he would ask first about Buddhist teachings and then about Buddhist practices, as if they were two different things. But they're not. Everything is part of the practice. Even the more abstract and theoretical teachings are meant to be used for pragmatic purposes when appropriate. After all, right view is part of the path. It's something to do, to develop, to be applied. When it's done its work, you let it go.

Right view comes down to the four noble truths, and the four noble truths are based on one of the Buddha's really categorical, across-the-board teachings: that you want to abandon unskillful behavior and engage only in skillful behavior. In other words, we're working on a skill here. The things we intentionally do with our body, with our words, and with our thoughts all count as kamma and they all have results. There's no such thing as idle thinking. It may be idle in its intent, but it actually has an impact on the mind. It's something you're doing, and it leaves kammic traces. Just as the Buddha discouraged idle, aimless speech, he also discouraged idle, aimless thinking.

So learn how to look at your thoughts in terms of what they do, the impact they have on the mind. The Buddha himself said that he got on the right path when he started dividing his thinking into these two types: thinking that was harmful and thinking that was harmless. In other words, he classed his thinking by the skillful or unskillful impact it had on the mind. From that distinction, the rest of the path grew.

In his time, most Indian philosophers got worked up about issues concerning the nature of the world and the nature of the self. But the Buddha didn't get involved in those issues, didn't answer any questions that would drag him into those issues, because he saw that they weren't helpful in putting an end to suffering. Many people got frustrated with him because they couldn't get a clear answer out of him on what they thought were the really important questions.

They mentioned this once to one of his lay followers and said, "This Buddha of yours: He's a nihilist. He doesn't teach anything at all." The man said, "No, that's not true. He teaches what's skillful and what's not skillful." Afterwards,

the man reported this conversation to the Buddha, and the Buddha praised him. He said, "That's the right answer, the right way to deal with those people."

When the Buddha was critical of other teachers, it was most frequently over their inability, one, to explain what is skillful or unskillful, or two, to provide an understanding of why it's important to act in a skillful way and to avoid unskillful behavior. So this is what we're here for, to use his explanation of these issues as an aid in developing a sense of skill with the mind. And even with skillful thinking, he said there are times when it's even more skillful to let the mind rest in right concentration. It's another factor of the path. In fact it's one of the central ones.

There's a passage where the Buddha refers to the other seven factors of the path as aids, as requisites to right concentration. Right concentration is the important one, the first factor of the path that the Buddha himself discovered. So that's what we work on. And in the process, we bring in the other factors as they are needed.

So learn how to make the mind content to be staying with the breath, staying right here. The mind has a tendency to think and evaluate, so use it to think and evaluate the breath. How does the breathing feel? Where do you feel it? How many layers of breath energy are there in the body? When you breathe in, what's happening in the different parts of the body? When you breathe out, what's happening? Do you know the places where you tend to hold on or to force the breath or to squeeze the breath in an uncomfortable way? Can you learn to breathe in a way that doesn't involve that holding or forcing or squeezing? That's taking the question of skillfulness and applying it right here, right now. How can you skillfully relate to the breath so that it's easier to stay with, so that staying with the breath induces a sense of ease, of fullness?

As you begin to feel that ease and fullness, learn to protect it. In the beginning it may feel simply like a neutral sensation, nothing painful yet nothing outstandingly pleasant. But just protect that neutral feeling for a while, and you'll begin to see that it does grow more and more pleasurable. Then think of that pleasure seeping easily throughout the different parts of the body. If there's a sense of blockage in any spot, think of allowing it to open up. If you sense a blank space in some part of the body you can't account for—say, where your hips should be—try to approach from the back down to the hips, and from the legs up into the hips, to see where the connection is.

There are lots of things you can do to make the breath interesting. And it is an interesting phenomenon, this breath energy in the body. It enables us to live. It enables us to move around. Without the breath, we'd be dead. It's what animates the whole body. It's the connection between the mind and the body. So it's good to explore.

As you explore the breath in this way, you're getting some basic hands-on practice with the four noble truths. Where is there stress? What's causing the stress? The stress can be caused either by ignorance or by craving. So as you get to know more and more about the breath, you're doing away with ignorance around the breathing process, what's called in technical terms the process of bodily fabrication. You bring more awareness to the process. As you do this, you'll notice that you may have some subtle craving around the breath. You may prefer the in-breath to the out-breath, so you make it longer than is really good

for you. Or you have gotten to like some subconscious ways of forcing the breath sensations, but ultimately they create problems. They create stress.

So you're beginning to see some of the causes of stress right here in the present moment simply in the way you breathe. As you let the mind settle down, you're developing the path. It's important to use these four noble truths as a framework because they help give you an idea of what you need to do. That's why the Buddha set them out as right view, because each of them involves a task. Stress is to be comprehended. In other words, look at it so that you really understand it, so that you stop identifying with it or seeing it as happening *to you*, and see it instead simply as an event connected with movements in the mind. When you see the movements of the mind that cause the stress, and you see that they're unnecessary, then you abandon them.

It's important to be clear about that. You don't abandon the stress. You abandon the cause. It's like coming into the kitchen and finding it filled with smoke. The first thing you do is to run to the stove or oven and turn off the flame, or run to the electric box and turn off the power to the oven or stove. In other words, you don't try to put out the smoke, you put out the flame. Here the flame is the craving and the ignorance. Those are the things you want to abandon. Once the flame is out, then the smoke will dissipate. And your knowing what to do and doing it: That's the path. You want to develop that as completely as you can, because your knowledge of the path will get more and more precise, more and more subtle as you work with it, until ultimately you can begin to realize for yourself what the ending of stress is like.

So these categories are here not just to talk about or to think about. You talk about them and think about them for the purpose of using them: figuring out how you're suffering right now and how you might apply the categories to what you're doing right now. There's a story about Chao Khun Naw, who was a famous meditation monk in Bangkok. One night as he was doing walking meditation outside his hut, a young monk came running up to him and said, "I've been thinking all day and I can't stop thinking." Chao Khun Naw looked at him and said, "You're doing the wrong task." That's all he said, and then he went into his hut. But the young monk had enough knowledge about the four noble truths to realize, "Oh, I've been developing the cause of suffering. What I should be developing is the path." That was enough to bring him to his senses.

Ajaan Fuang tells of how he was once sick with a chronic headache that would last for days on end. It got so bad that other monks would stay in his room at night in case he woke up in pain. One night after midnight he woke up in pain and, as he got up, he looked around. All the monks who were supposed to be looking after him were sound asleep. He said to himself, "Who's looking after whom here?" But then he said, "Well as long as I'm awake, I might as well meditate." So he sat in meditation. As he was looking at the pain, he suddenly realized he'd been doing the wrong thing. He'd been trying to get rid of the pain when actually the pain was something to be comprehended. So that's what he did, and that shift in understanding proved to be a real turning point in his practice.

The categories of the four truths are here to help you to realize what you should do and to catch yourself if you're applying the wrong task, if you're trying to let go of good things or develop unskillful things. If you can catch yourself doing that, then you can switch around. Ultimately your appreciation of

these categories gets so subtle, so refined, that as Ajaan Mun says, they all become one. In other words, they finally get to the point where there's just one task: letting go, totally. Because after you've dealt with the blatant forms of stress and let go of the causes, you begin to realize that the only thing left is the path doing its work. The only stress still in the mind is the stress of the path, because there's a subtle level of stress that keeps concentration going, that keeps discernment active. In other words, even the path is stress, the cause of stress, and so at that point you let go of it.

As for the cessation of stress, there are passages in the Canon describing how people touch the deathless and yet develop a passion for it. The passion for the deathless then becomes their one remaining obstacle. They've got to learn how to let go of that, too.

That's why the Buddha said that all phenomena are not-self, because you hit a place in the practice where you're latching onto your experience of the deathless. You have to learn how to not identify with that. That, too, becomes something you let go. When you do that, you reach the ultimate end of the practice.

So these four noble truths are tools for getting you to the point where they all collapse into one, so there's one duty left: the duty of letting go all around. But until you reach that point, it's wise to keep these four categories in the back of your mind, along with their underlying principle: the idea of skillfulness—that we're here to develop a skill, to act skillfully, speak skillfully, and to think skillfully. You realize that there really is a difference between skillful and unskillful behavior, just as there's a real difference between the pleasure and pain they cause.

Keep that distinction in mind. Remind yourself that everything the Buddha taught was meant to be used as a tool on the path at one point or another. Sometimes some teachings may not be the right tool for you right now. As the Buddha said, words have to be evaluated as to whether they're true or false, but even if they're true, you want to say only things that are beneficial. And even if they're true and beneficial, you have to look for the right time and right place to say them. So apply that same principle to your thinking: Are these thoughts true? Are they beneficial? And is this the right time and place for that thinking, that teaching? If it's not, let it go for the time being.

Like right now, this is the right time and place to stay focused on the breath, bringing all your attention to how you can get the mind to settle down here. And as long as that skill hasn't been mastered, that should be your top priority. Other issues can wait.