

## *Appropriate Attention, Appropriate Intention*

*March 25, 2014*

The Buddha once said that all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering—or, to translate it another way, stress and the end of stress. That statement right there says several things: One, it focuses you on the issue that you should be paying attention to; and two, it tells you *how* you should pay attention to it. The first point is important because we tend to create all kinds of other issues in our lives, so that the big issue of why we're making ourselves suffer gets pushed aside, gets covered up. Because we have so many other priorities, we want to have some other problem solved first or some other issue explained – or explained away.

Yet here the Buddha's saying that you've really got to focus on this as *the* primary issue. Pay it careful attention – what *is* suffering? What would be the end of suffering? That's how you focus on the topic. In other words, you're looking at it in such a way so that helps put an end to it.

The Buddha, of course, is not forcing you to look at it this way. He's not even forcing you to look at suffering. The suffering itself pushes you. But he's recommending that this is a crucial thing to focus on and that you want to focus on it in a way that allows you to see what's causing it and what you can do to put an end to it—if it really is possible to put an end to it.

That gives you the four noble truths; and each of those truths carries a duty. You try to comprehend suffering. In other words, sit with it long enough to watch it and figure out what really is the suffering here. He boils it down to the five clinging-aggregates, which is not an immediately clear or obvious way of explaining it. To see it in those terms, you have to look at it carefully and take it apart. That way, when you see what suffering is, you can watch it carefully enough to see what the cause is, to develop dispassion for the cause and to abandon it, to let it go. And to do that, you have to develop the path – so that you can realize the end of suffering. Those are the duties: comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, realize its cessation by developing the path. Those duties all go together. You can't comprehend the suffering without developing the path, which is what we're doing right now: focusing on the breath, trying to give rise to a state of right concentration—and, once it's there, trying to maintain it so that it develops.

So we're applying appropriate *attention* and trying to develop appropriate *intentions* around this, too. These two qualities have to go together. The fact that we're focusing on the problem of suffering is because we want to put an end to it. There's an intention right there. And we want to understand it properly so that we can do it effectively. We listen to the teachings on the four noble truths—appropriate attention—and then we decide that we're

going to try to put them into practice. That's appropriate intention.

Like right now, we're here trying to give rise to the state of concentration. That's the appropriate duty with regard to the path. You develop it. You don't just watch and say, "Oh, here comes some mindfulness...and there it goes" or, "Here comes a moment of concentration...and there it goes..." That's not insight, that's laziness. There's work to be done.

If things are not working, aren't developing, you have to ask yourself: What's lacking? Are you not really focusing on the issue of suffering? Think about it for a while. If you could put an end to the suffering that you cause for yourself, there would be a lot of good that would come in all kinds of areas. You could live with the difficulties in the world and yet not suffer from them. The world is a difficult place, and we make ourselves suffer over the difficulties—but we don't have to. That's the good news here. There's a way to understand the processes in the mind and develop dispassion for all the things that make us suffer.

It's funny, we *are* passionate for the things that make us suffer. That's our problem. We *like* a lot of the things that cause suffering and we actually like a lot of the things that really are suffering in and of themselves. But we don't recognize them. We don't comprehend that they're suffering.

So that's the first part of appropriate attention: to learn how to recognize these things and see the importance of this problem. And to see how the mind is creating lots of problems for itself if it avoids looking at this problem and working on it with the proper framework. That's why we have the contemplation of the parts of the body, because often we look for pleasure in the body. But what's there of any permanent essence that we can really rely on?

It's the same reason why we have contemplation of death: The body is going to leave us, we're going to leave this world—and what do we take with us? We're going to take our actions, but good actions in the present moment are no solid guarantee. We can live the best life possible in this lifetime and still have some bad karma from a previous lifetime. Who knows what could sneak in from the past? We're in a very precarious position. So it's good to see the precariousness to develop a sense of samvega for any other type of attention or intention that doesn't fall in line with the four noble truths.

When you can lose interest in the other things that pull you away from developing concentration, then you can really work on that intention to get the mind focused. Then it becomes an issue of learning how to understand your mind: What does your mind like to settle down with? Concentration is not meant to be a process of forcing yourself to stay with something that you don't like. You need to have a sense of pleasure in order for your mind to settle down here willingly. So find an object that the mind finds congenial, that you like to stay with, that you can stay with for at least some period of time. Work with the breath so that it becomes comfortable. Interesting. Intriguing. That will help nurture your intention to help

stay with it.

This quality of generating desire—in other words, of motivating yourself—is really important. It requires learning how to read your mind and get a sense of what works and what doesn't work. This is why we spend time with the meditation: It requires a certain amount of familiarity. And some imagination. What are the different ways you can breathe? What are the different parts of the body that could be doing the breathing for you? We have instinctive ways of having either the chest breathe or the stomach breathe or the shoulders breathe. Sometimes there are patterns of tension that come in and out through the head. We take them for granted. It's good to ask yourself, are these the only ways we can breathe? Are there other ways we can breathe? What if we think of the *whole* nervous system doing the breathing?

What does that do? In other words, in order to pay *attention* to the concentration, you have to motivate yourself, so that your *intention* is also focused. The two qualities go together – appropriate attention, appropriate intention – and they feed off each other. The intention turns into concentration, the attention is what develops your discernment. You need both. And they have to be appropriate. There's no such thing as “bare” attention in the Buddha's teachings. It's all colored by your intention.

So learn how to keep your intentions properly focused, to figure out why, after all the things the Buddha learned in his awakening, this was the issue he focused on teaching. Everything in his teaching revolves around this topic. It's not like suffering was the only thing he mentioned, but everything he talks about, he deals from this perspective – how to understand the way in which you create suffering for yourself and how to understand things so that you can put an end to it.

When your focus really is narrowed down to this point, you find that it's not just a narrow point. It covers a huge area of your life. But if you can solve this one problem, all your other problems are not going to weigh on the mind. Some things you can solve, some things you can't, that's the way of the world. But *this* is a problem you can solve. So it's really worthwhile. And the solution shows you things that you might never have expected.