

Rooted in Desire

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The Dhammapada starts with two verses on the topic of the power of the mind. The mind is the forerunner of all dhammas. The mind is their chief; they're made of the mind. And we may say, on one level, that this sounds reasonable. The way you look at things, the way you act, will have an influence on what you experience. But it goes a lot deeper than that. Everything comes out of the mind. Everything you experience comes from the factor of fabrication in dependent co-arising that's even prior to the experience of the six senses. We tend to think of the mind as being something passive; receiving input from outside and then responding in the old stimulus-response mode—that only after the stimulus do we play a role in shaping things outside. But that view is much too passive.

Things start with the movement of the mind outward. That's where all the trouble comes from, and so that's where the problem has to be solved. As the Buddha said, everything is rooted in desire. All dhammas are rooted in desire. You look at the four noble truths: The causal truths, i.e., the second truth and the fourth—the cause of suffering and the path to the cessation of suffering—are actions. There's the action of craving and clinging. There's the action of the desire in right effort.

So the question is, which desires are you going to follow? And how deep does it go, this question of how the mind is shaping things? It goes a lot deeper than you might think. This is why insight comes from asking questions about actions, because the results of actions are pleasure and pain. And the Buddha says, "Look at that pain. Where is it coming from? What's the cause?" And he tells us to look into the mind for the cause.

Of course, to deal with pain, we need to have a sense of pleasure someplace as our foundation, which is why we practice concentration. Right effort leads to right mindfulness. We're remembering to give rise to skillful qualities. And we're remembering to try to abandon unskillful ones. Right mindfulness then forms the theme around which right concentration develops. So this desire to put an end to suffering leads to mindfulness, and from there it leads to getting the mind to settle down and be really still in concentration with a sense of well-being so that it can look at what else is going on on a deeper level.

The greater the stillness of the mind, the more subtle the movements of the mind you'll be able to see. And you keep wanting to ask: "Is there any uptick in the level of stress? Any lowering of the level of stress?" If you can catch that, you ask yourself then: "What did I just do? What arose together with the stress? And what passed together with the stress?"

This is why the cause of stress is called *samudaya*, something "arising together," because, after all, part of your experience is based on past actions. And it's hard sometimes to see the relationship between a past action and a present one. As the Buddha said, the workings of

karma are really complex. Sometimes an action may be not just from one previous lifetime, but from lifetimes before that. How are you going to track that connection down? What you *can* track down is what you're doing right now.

And as I said, in dependent co-arising, what you're doing right now—the fabrications that usually come out of ignorance—come prior to input from the senses, even the sixth sense, i.e., the mind that's aware of ideas. So you're already shaping things before you have any input at all. What we're trying to do as we practice is to shape things with knowledge, with awareness, alertness. That's what the questions focusing on stress do, because otherwise you just go flowing through the various causal links in the chain without paying much attention to what you're doing. It's become so natural that you don't see the extent to which you're fabricating things.

Only when you ask questions do you begin to notice, "Oh, there was something happening there. I did this, and this resulted." So learning how to ask the right questions at the right time is an important part of gaining discernment. The Buddha said that it's a sign of people of discernment: how they approach a question; how they frame the question; how they apply it. His observation applies to the discernment related to understanding not only how to explain ideas and to ask questions about ideas you've heard explained, but also how to question the workings of your own mind. What are the perceptions that shape the way you're going about things? What are the assumptions? The assumption of "self" is a big one. The various perceptions about your relationship to the world: Those are also things you've got to learn how to question.

And a good place to start is your relationship to your breath. How do you focus on the breath in such a way that gives rise to well-being? How do you focus on it in a way that gives rise to stress? What's the difference? This is something we have to look at over and over and over again, because only when you've been over and over something many times do you see the details. Ajaan Lee's image is of walking back and forth on a path: When you do that, you see the little things on the side of the path you might not have noticed otherwise. The little changes. Certain plants are growing. Certain trees are dying. Certain flowers are blooming or wilting. Certain animals are crawling across the path or are on the side of the path. If you're preoccupied with other things, you're not going to see these things no matter how many times you go back and forth. But if you're curious and observant, you'll see things on the side of the path that weren't there before. And you'll notice: Something's changed. Something's up.

In particular, you want to look at your actions. What are the desires underlying your actions? We all know that desire tends to be blind. How do you bring some vision to them, so that you see not only what you want to see, but also what's actually going on. The Buddha gives you lots of detailed instructions as to where to look, what kinds of questions to ask.

But you may find that the particulars of your situation right now require slightly different questions that come from the basic ones. The trick lies in learning how to tweak them so

they're just right for you. But the questioning is not done in the abstract. It's focused on what's going on right here, right now, what you're doing right here, right now, as you get the mind into concentration. That's the ideal action to look for, even when you're doing other themes of meditation aside from the breath.

There's always the question: What are you doing? And are the results consistent with what you've done before? When you're contemplating the body—the 32 parts, like we chanted just now—there are days when it's easy to visualize the different parts of the body, and say, “Yeah, that's all there is to the body.” Why are those days different from other days when you resist seeing this? Or why is it so easy to shift back to your old perception that the body's something good looking, something attractive? What was the desire that skewed your perceptions?

This question focuses on a particular action, which is why the Buddha set the four noble truths as his definition for right view, because as he said, the cause of suffering is an action. The path to the cessation of suffering is an action. This is to keep our minds always in that framework. The problem is that even in Buddhist circles, people shift away from that framework to a more passive view.

A couple of months ago, when I was working on the book on the noble eightfold path, I was reading other books explaining the noble eightfold path. And I was struck by how many times that the authors, when explaining right view, would make a brief mention of the four noble truths, but then shift really quickly into the three characteristics, saying that the four noble truths are true because things are impermanent, unsatisfactory, not self. That's the reality out there, and we suffer because we cling to things that change. The implication here is if we didn't cling, then we could still live with things that change and there would be no problem. And on one level, that's true. But that assumption doesn't bring us to that place of real peace. To get to that place, you have to see that the things are changing because your *desires* are changing. It's not that you're sitting here just misunderstanding the nature of things and trying to force some permanence on things that won't be permanent. *Any* act of clinging is going to cause suffering. Even if you cling to the experience of the deathless, you're going to suffer.

Another problem with basing right view on the three characteristics is that the implication is that if you don't resist change, then you'll be okay. You're told, “Just go with the flow. Don't have any fixed views. Allow everything to change.” This idea is sometimes even used to justify changing the Dhamma. Of course, the Dhamma's going to change. But the Buddha didn't regard that as a positive thing. His image was of a drum: A crack develops in the drum, and so you place a peg in the crack. Another crack develops. You place another peg. Eventually, the whole drum is nothing but pegs. And it's not going to make the sound that the old drum made when it was one solid piece of wood. Changes in the Dhamma don't go in a good direction. So the Buddha's not simply saying, “Well, learn how to accept change and you'll be okay.” He's saying, “You're creating things that are changing. And then you're latching onto them. You're

clinging to them. That's suffering." In fact, your clinging is creating things from which you suffer.

So you've got to turn around and look at that action of clinging. And make use of the help that the Dhamma gives. Don't try to change the Dhamma, because otherwise it's not going to be as helpful.

So remember, the basic framework is the four noble truths. And the four noble truths start with actions. Our experience is all based on action. So when there's suffering, you ask yourself, "What are the actions leading to that?" Get the mind still enough so it can see and know where to look.

The problem isn't out there with the world. The problem is in here. We play a role in creating our experience and then we forget about it. And then we blame the experience. So turn around. Look at this part of the mind that's constantly fabricating things in ignorance, under the force of desire. Bring some knowledge there through your questions, through your mindfulness and alertness and all the other good qualities you're trying to develop in the concentration. That's when you get to the root of the matter.

Then when you get to the root, everything falls apart. But it doesn't fall apart in a bad way. It opens up to something that's unfabricated, that won't change. When there's no desire to create dhammas, we open to the end of dhammas, where there's no clinging, no suffering at all. It's like finding the right key and putting it in the right keyhole to unlock things so that everything good will open up.