

Ignorance

March 12, 2008

There's a question the Buddha has us ask ourselves every day. It's this: "Days and nights fly past, fly past, what am I doing right now?" That's the big issue. Notice the question is not, "Who am I?" That's a question the Buddha says is not worth asking. If you try to answer that question you end up getting lost in what he calls a thicket of views, a jungle of views, a tangle of views, a fetter of views.

So the problem is not that we don't know who we are; we don't know what we're doing. We want happiness—everything we do, say, and think is motivated by the desire for happiness, the desire for well-being—and yet often what we do, say, and think leads to suffering. That's the real problem in life. That's precisely the problem the Buddha proposes to solve.

He wants us to understand why we don't know what we're doing and how we can learn to do things skillfully. The reason we don't know what we're doing is because we're bewildered by suffering. Suffering is complex. It doesn't come from one single cause. It comes from many causes acting together. And the principle behind those causes is complex. It's not the case that if you do something unskillful, lightning will immediately strike out of the sky. Sometimes the suffering you experience comes from actions you did a long time ago and you don't see the connections.

So as he said, our normal everyday reaction to suffering is twofold: On the one hand we're bewildered by it, and on the other we start searching: Who is there out there who knows a way out of this suffering? As children we go immediately to our mothers, our fathers. We find that there are some kinds of suffering they can help us with and others they can't. So we go looking for other people. And because our quest, our search outside is based on bewilderment, it often leads us to the wrong people, to the wrong ideas of what we can do about suffering. So we have to learn how to look very carefully at what we do and what comes about as the result of what we do.

That's why the Buddha said the basic distinction in his teachings is the distinction between what's skillful and what's not. What are you doing that leads to well being and what are you doing that leads to suffering? He said that when he learned how to divide his thoughts into two types, skillful and unskillful, that was the beginning of getting on the right path. In other words, he learned how to look at his thoughts not so much in terms of their content, but in terms of the causes behind them and the results to which they lead. He looked at his thoughts as events in a causal pattern.

This is why, when we meditate, we learn how to step outside of our thoughts. Focus on the breath to create a foundation from which you can then look at other thoughts as they arise, to see them simply as events, arising and passing away as part of a causal stream, so that you don't get carried away in the stream of what they might mean.

It was from this basic distinction between skillful and unskillful that the Buddha drew out the four Noble Truths: skillful causes, the path; unskillful causes, craving; the results of skillful causes, i.e., the end of suffering; and the

results of unskillful causes, i.e., continued suffering. Those are the four categories of the four Truths. And this, the Buddha said, is precisely what we need to know if we're going to put an end to suffering. We have to learn how to look at our actions in these terms.

To begin with, the four Noble Truths are like a framework for looking at the issues of your life. When anything comes up, ask yourself: Is this suffering or is it the cause of suffering? Or am I on the path to the end? Which part of the path to the end?—because, after all, the path is eightfold, and you want to know which folds you've got. Then when you know which category you're dealing with, you have an idea of what to do with it. If it's suffering, you have to learn how to comprehend it. That means watching it carefully to see how it arises, how it passes away, so that you can develop a sense of dispassion for it.

Often the things we like turn out to be forms of suffering, but we've desensitized ourselves to the fact. But if we learn how to look carefully, we begin to see how these things we like are really stressful. You want to learn to see them from that perspective so that you can develop a sense of dispassion toward them. Otherwise you just keep on creating more suffering without realizing what you're doing. But once you realize that there's suffering, you look for what you're doing that's causing the suffering, what else arises in the mind at the same time as that suffering or stress. In particular, you look for where the craving is, what *kind* of craving it is - it can be sensual craving, craving for a state of becoming, or craving to see whatever becoming has come into being be destroyed—because that craving, too, leads to more kinds of becoming. That's one of the paradoxes in the Buddha's teaching.

If you recognize any of these kinds of craving, your duty is to abandon them, to let them go. Now this often goes against our old habits. Just as we often mistake stress for something that we actually like, we tend to see our forms of craving as our friends. We like them, we nourish them, we take them as our companions. But as the Buddha said, these things are like someone who's worked his way into our confidence, into our trust, and then someday plans to kill us. So you have to be very wary of these things. When you recognize them, let them go. No matter how much you've liked them in the past, you have to realize that if you want to put an end to this suffering you've been creating, you have to learn how change your habits. You let these things go.

As for the path, that's something you want to develop. Mindfulness is something you want to develop, concentration: all the factors of the path. Don't simply watch them come and go. If you see that mindfulness has arisen, you want to maintain it, you want to develop it. If it's lapsed, you do what you can to reestablish it. Keep working at this, bring it into being. This is a form of becoming, but it's the kind of becoming you need in order to get to the end of the path. Because as you learn how to understand the process of becoming through creating skillful states of becoming, you develop the sensitivity that allows you ultimately to let go of any kind of becoming.

And finally when you see the ending of suffering, i.e., dispassion for the craving, you watch that. In other words, you're not only letting go, you're *watching* the letting go, you witness the letting go at the same time to see what happens.

When you learn how to look at your actions and your experience in this way—

in terms of this framework and of the duties that come from the framework—that's when you're on the path. You're practicing what's called appropriate attention: looking at the really important issues of what's happening in the present moment and what you need to do in response. It's not the case that you see suffering once and comprehend it and that's all you need to do. Your powers of comprehension grow stronger as you develop the path, and you need them to be stronger to see the subtleties that surround the issue of suffering. All these factors are really interrelated and they're all skills that you develop together.

This is why the path is a gradual one. You need to develop your sensitivity over time—which is why the work put into being skillful not only as you're meditating but also in the course of the day is effort well spent. It's worthwhile work. You're not distracting yourself from the unconditioned as you focus on these things; you are actually sensitizing yourself to the area in your awareness where eventually the unconditioned will be revealed. As the Buddha said, you touch the deathless with the body. In other words, the same place where you're experiencing the body right now is where the deathless will be touched. The body itself is not the deathless, but that area of your awareness is where you will see, where you will touch the unconditioned. And the only way you can see it there is to sensitize yourself to the area through becoming more and more skillful with the way you breathe, the way you think, the way you deal with your feelings and perceptions.

All these processes of fabrication are conditioned by ignorance. This is why paying attention to that simple question of "What am I doing right now?" is not just a means for being heedful, which is one of the reasons the Buddha has you ask that question. It's also directing you to the spot that you need to work on in order to put an end to suffering: the spot where intention happens, the spot where results of your intentions are experienced. You really want to become sensitive to these processes so that you can take them apart.

So it's not a question of who you are. It's a question of what you're doing. What are the results of what you're doing? How can you do it more skillfully? How do you apply the different duties of the four Noble Truths so that you get more and more skilled at them? Those are questions worth asking and worth finding an answer for. Once you've fully understood those answers, fully mastered all the procedures needed to find those answers, you've reached the end of questioning. You know true happiness, which was the reason you've been acting all along. That's when all your ignorance will end. You may still not know the answers to a lot of other questions, but answering these questions takes care of all the really important issues in life.