

# *The Bright Tunnel*

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“Those who don’t discern suffering.” It sounds strange. We all know that there’s suffering in life. The problem is that we don’t really look at it. We try to run away, we try to cover it up—anything not to have to deal with it. As a result, it keeps hounding us. No matter where we go, there it is, right at our heels.

There comes a point where you have to turn around and face it: This is suffering, right here, right now. But if you try to look at it without any tools, without any skills, though, it can seem overwhelming.

This is why we have the path of practice. You work on the precepts so that when you come to the issue of suffering, you don’t carry around a lot of guilt, a lot of denial. These two things really get in the way. If there’s guilt there may be a feeling that, “Maybe I deserve to suffer.” If there’s denial, then there’s the feeling, “This suffering is unjust, it shouldn’t be happening.” Or you just cover it up, pretending that it isn’t happening. Either way you don’t really get to the root of the problem. You don’t understand it.

If you try to understand it without any concentration, it’s hard to maintain your focus. At the same time, it’s hard to maintain a sense of not being threatened by the suffering. This is why we work at developing our concentration, because concentration involves not only a focus but also a sense of wellbeing with your focus. You stay with the breath, get to know the breath, be friends with the breath. This is important. Many times, when we’re working with a meditation object and things don’t seem to be going well, the meditation object seems to become our enemy. If that’s your attitude, you’ll never be able to settle down with it.

Realize that the breath is your friend. It’s what’s keeping you alive. If you get to know it, you find it has all sorts of other good qualities, other than maintaining mere survival. It can create a sense of ease, a sense of wellbeing, here in the present moment. You breathe in and feel full throughout the body; you breathe out and feel relaxed throughout the whole body.

There’s a sense of energy and wellbeing that comes when you get to know the breath and learn to deal with it properly. When the sense of ease, energy, and wellbeing is solid, you can turn your attention to the issue of suffering.

Learn how to discern suffering. Where is it? How is it happening? The Buddha says, basically, that it comes down to what he calls the five clinging

aggregates. There's form affected by clinging, feeling affected by clinging, perceptions, thought fabrications, consciousness, all of which are affected by clinging. The clinging is what turns them into suffering. The clinging is what tries to wring a happiness out of them that they simply don't have to offer.

Having to run around clinging to things all the time puts the mind in a miserable position. The other word for clinging is the act of taking sustenance: you're feeding on these things. The mind that has to feed here, feed there—it's a hungry mind. It's a mind whose food source always has to be protected. It can't go anywhere without that food source. So it's limited, limited by its own need to cling. So you develop strength in the mind to bring it to the point where it doesn't have to feed, doesn't have to hold onto things.

There are the five strengths: the strength of conviction in your own ability to do the practice, conviction in the powers of your own actions. The strengths of persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. Discernment is the one that keeps all the strengths strong, as you begin to take apart exactly where the clinging is, *why* it is.

There are four kinds of clinging. You cling to sensual passion, you cling to views, you cling to set ways of doing things, and you cling, ultimately, to your sense of what you are, your sense of identification, saying, "This is me, this is mine."

The reason we cling is because we lack strength. So we develop these strengths of mind in order to see through the fact that, once the mind understands itself, understands its own situation, it doesn't have to hold on anymore. Once its powers of concentration are strong enough, once its discernment matures—seeing exactly how clinging happens and how it can be taken apart—there's no more need to cling. Then you can let go. You've fed the mind to the point where it doesn't need to feed anymore.

When the Buddha talks about the four Noble Truths, he says our duty with regard to suffering is to comprehend it. Comprehending means understanding to the point where you can let go. When you see that the suffering isn't necessary, that the mind itself is what's creating the causes, then you stop naturally. As long as you feel that you've got to hold onto things, to do this or that, to think this or that way—as long as the mind is constricted like this, it's not going to let go. No matter how much you tell it, no matter how much you explain, no matter how many Dharma books you read or Dharma talks you listen to, it's still going to hold on because it feels someplace deep down that it has to. It's afraid to let go. But when you finally train the mind to develop discernment and see through the situation, when you realize that the clinging isn't necessary and it's suffering, then why do it? That's when you can let go—you don't have to tell the mind to let go. It automatically stops.

So, we're working on the path to the end of suffering. People sometimes complain that the Buddha focuses an awful lot on suffering. That's because he has a cure. If you had a cure for suffering, wouldn't you want to talk about it too?

The people who are afraid to talk about suffering: they're the ones who don't have a cure. They always try to cover things up, pretend it's not really that bad a situation: "This is the ordinary life that everybody lives, this is as good as it gets—so you might as well enjoy it, make the best of it." That's desperation.

The Buddha wasn't desperate. He was coming from a position of total freedom. He said "Look, if you really sit down and with the proper tools and the proper approach try to discern suffering, get to the point where you really comprehend it, and let go, you've solved all your problems in life."

So, who's pessimistic and who's optimistic? We might say that the Buddha's realistic, but realistic in a way that sees through all the problems the mind creates for itself. Once the mind isn't creating anymore problems for itself, you're free to go wherever you like.

At that point, the Buddha said, he had nothing more to teach. This is the basic issue: suffering and the end of suffering. Once you comprehend both sides of the Buddha's teachings, what suffering is and how it can be brought to an end, and you directly experience the end of suffering, you've finished the Buddha's teachings. As they say: "The Holy Life is completed. The task is done." There's nothing left for you to do. At that point you can live out the rest of your life in total freedom.

So, even when the training seems onerous, when it seems long, still there's light at the end of the tunnel. Actually, it's not a dark tunnel, it's a bright tunnel. The Buddha never asked you to do anything dishonest, anything you'd be ashamed to do—unlike the world outside.

He offers you a skill. The Buddha never throws you in with the tigers without your magic bullet. When the Buddha tells you about the tasks with regard to the Noble Truths, that's something you have to keep reminding yourself of over and over. Suffering is to be comprehended. Craving is to be abandoned.

All too often we see our cravings as our friends. We work with them, try to bring them to completion. They never reach completion. There's always one more, one more. When you realize that your "friends" are just causing you unnecessary suffering, you learn how to drop them.

The world doesn't have anything worth craving. When you see that, then whatever time you have left.... You don't know how much you have, but whatever you do have—then as long as you're following the Buddha's path you're making the best use of whatever time you've got.