

# Willing to Learn

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As the Buddha once said, suffering usually results in one of two things, often both: One is bewilderment and the other is a search outside for someone who might know a way to get rid of the suffering.

This starts from our childhood. We're hungry and we look to our mother. We have this problem, that problem, and we look to our parents, our siblings, our friends—anybody who might have some idea of how to overcome whatever suffering or stress is bothering us. Because that search for outside advice is accompanied by bewilderment, we often look in the wrong places, take the wrong advice, which of course just leads to more and more suffering.

Now the solution to this, the Buddha says, is not that we shouldn't listen to anybody's advice. That's not what he was advising at all. Even that famous passage from the Kalama Sutta that everybody seems to think advises you to go by your own sense of right and wrong: That's not what it says. It starts out by saying, "Don't go by scriptures, don't go by reports," but this doesn't mean to reject these things. It simply means that you can't absolutely trust them as your authority.

But then he also says, "Don't go by your own sense of what seems reasonable," because that's not always right, either. When you see for yourself that a certain pattern of action leads to suffering for yourself or for others, and that it's also criticized by the wise, then you drop it. As for something that doesn't lead to suffering for yourself or other people, a path of action that's praised by the wise, that's something you can follow.

So he's advising a combination of seeing for yourself in your own actions and also developing a good sense of who's wise and who isn't—in other words, learning to look for the right people to listen to. When you meet the right person, like the Buddha, where does he point? He points right back to your own experience. The four noble truths. What do these truths talk about, if they're not talking about things that you already have inside you? You already have suffering and stress, you already have craving, and to some extent you have the elements of the path, the end of suffering and stress.

So we need these four noble truths to remind us of where we really ought to look. And they include pointers as to what you're supposed to do with each of these truths. Suffering is something you should try to comprehend—which is not our immediate reaction to it. Our immediate reaction is to push it away, or to try

to run away from it in the midst of all of our bewilderment and search. But the Buddha says, "Try to comprehend it," which means that you have to sit down and look at it.

Now, to look at it requires some strength of mind, and strength of mind needs help. That's what the path is all about. It develops the factors in the mind that can help put you in a position where you can really comprehend the suffering and stress: factors like mindfulness, alertness, skillful intentions, skillful understanding. We all already have these qualities to some extent, simply that they're not developed. We have to work on them.

And that's the important issue. Who does the work? We have to do our own work. That right there is a lesson that many of us don't like to hear. We like the idea that we can be the authorities on what is ultimately right and wrong, what ultimately works and doesn't work, but we don't like to be told that we have to work more, or that we have to be the ones who are responsible for the results of the work. We're always looking for somebody outside to be responsible: "Something is wrong with the teacher. I've got to find another teacher." "Can't practice in America, got to go some place else." "Don't like this, don't like that." These likes and dislikes get in our way. We use them to justify not really looking at ourselves or seeing where we're still lacking. Sometimes the ideas we hold to most strongly are the ones where we're most stupid.

That's a word Ajaan Suwat used to like use a lot. His translation for *avijja*, which ordinarily is translated as ignorance, was "stupidity." We hold on to ideas even though they have proven themselves again and again and again that they don't work. It's like that famous story about Nasrudin eating a whole bushel full of peppers and crying. Someone asked him, "Why do you keep eating peppers when they make you cry?" And he responded, "Because I'm looking for the sweet one." For a lot of us, that's our attitude to life. We keep trying the same old things over and over again, even though they've never worked. We keep looking for the sweet pepper, even though we've never found one. We keep looking outside for help—and the Buddha offers help—but his way of helping is to tell you to turn around and do the work yourself.

We're not sitting here waiting for some vision to come, or some Bodhisattva to come down to tell us what to do. We have to figure out what to do on our own. Again, the Buddha gives help, he gives pointers, but figuring out exactly when to use which dharma teaching: That's something we have to learn how to observe for ourselves.

So the principles are all laid out. If you see in yourself any habits that are causing stress and suffering, you work to let go of them. Or any mental states that you know will cause stress and suffering if they arise, you work not to give rise to them. You try to prevent them from happening. As for skillful states that

lead to clarity of knowledge, if they're not there in your mind or if they're weak, you try to give rise to them. If they're there already, you try to strengthen them. Try to develop a sense of desire, persistence, intentness in doing this. People outside can give pep talks, they can give pointers, but you are the one who actually has to do the work.

So you have to be observant. This is one of the most important principles in the Buddha's teaching: that you have to be willing to learn, that you have to learn how to learn. Most of us are pretty poor at that. In school, we were handed all sorts of information. If we didn't understand it, it was the teacher's fault. That seems to be the attitude of a lot of people. But as a meditator, you have to develop the willingness and the desire to learn new things. Try things out, look at what works, look at what doesn't work. When things don't work, don't let yourself get depressed or down. When things work well, don't let yourself get too careless. You've got to develop an even mind about these things as you experiment. Otherwise, you want your meditation to gratify your sense of ego, and then when it doesn't, you don't like it. In either case, the gratification of the ego becomes the important issue, and not the actual learning of something new.

How does this breath meditation work? How can you get yourself to sit for longer periods of time? How can you deal with this particular defilement in the mind? These are some of the things you want to learn. If one approach doesn't work, you don't let yourself get discouraged. You try another one. Learn how to develop your ingenuity in coming up with new approaches. Again, the teachings of the Buddha, the teachings of the forest masters, give all kinds of advice. But they keep reminding you that you're going to have to work out the details yourself. There's no magic bullet that's going to solve all of your problems. Sometimes a particular approach works in getting the mind to settle down, and the next day it doesn't. This shows that the mind is in a different state, requires a different approach.

The same with trying to develop insight. Today one approach will work in developing insight into a particular kind of suffering, and then tomorrow it won't work at all, which shows that the suffering is a little bit different this time. After all, dependent co-arising has all kinds of pathways through which suffering can arise. So there's no way that one technique is going to cover them all.

But that's not really a problem. What makes it a problem is our desire to have one approach that's going to cure everything, that's going to solve all of our problems forever, and we won't have to think again. That's not the attitude of a meditator. A meditator develops whatever qualities are needed to lead to new learning. Once you have those qualities, you're happy to use them.

It's like developing any skill. The more you master the skill, the more you enjoy putting it to use in all kinds of new areas, playing with it, experimenting with it, seeing what has to be adjusted and what doesn't. Even arahants, after they've taken care of the problem of suffering, are still willing to learn about other things in the course of teaching other people how to find the way. Even though the issue of their suffering is solved, and they're not creating any more suffering, they see that other people are still suffering and so they try to figure out ways to help them. That's their attitude.

So try to work on the qualities that give rise to new knowledge. Learn how to be more and more self-reliant in this way. When you can do that, then there's no longer the issue of whether you're in the right place to meditate or not, or whether you're with the right teacher or in the right situation. You simply realize that those elements were not the problem at all. The problem was an inner lack of willingness to really sit down and watch and learn, to chip away at your own stupidity, to chip away at the things that you sometimes believe most strongly, are most strongly attached to. "It's got to be this way": That's what the clinging mind says. And sometimes that's precisely the problem: your unwillingness to look at other alternatives. That stubbornness is what you've got to unlearn.

Even though the Buddha is willing to give as much help as he can, there's only so much help that even a Buddha can give. We look outside for advice on how to put an end to suffering, hoping to find somebody else to take care of the problem for us, but the Buddha just points you back to yourself again. Still, he gives us the tools—his instructions on the four noble truths. Try to comprehend the suffering, he says. When you see the craving and the ignorance that underlie the suffering, try to let go. Develop the qualities of mind—whatever's needed in terms of concentration or insight—so that you can really look at suffering long and hard. Look at stress long and hard to see what's causing it. Look at each instance. Even if you don't find the one thing that's going to get rid of all suffering—the big block, the huge abstraction of suffering—work on your individual sufferings, your individual instances of stress, the individual desires, the individual cravings, work on them one by one. Don't be so self-important that you can't deal with the details.

Realize that these things don't come all at once in all their fullness. There will be an individual desire, an individual instance of stress. Well, you learn from the individual pieces, the individual instances. Over time you begin to detect patterns that you wouldn't have seen if you weren't willing to look carefully.

So when there's pain in the body, learn how to sit with it. Try to figure out what way you can sit with it so that the mind doesn't suffer. This will require concentration. It'll require insight. It'll require the right attitudes, the attitudes that you've developed through the other elements of the path as well, through

being generous and virtuous: generous in learning how to give up certain things, virtuous in learning how to refrain from certain types of activity. In this case, you learn how to give up certain ways of thinking, refrain from certain ways of thinking. That in and of itself helps an awful lot. Translate the skills of generosity and virtue into meditative skills. Then work on the more refined skills that come from just sitting here with the pain, sitting here with the stress in the mind, and realizing that the physical pain doesn't have to stress the mind. You're doing something wrong if you let it stress the mind. It's not that you're doing something wrong that causes the pain, but there's something wrong in the way you relate to it that causes the suffering.

Try to see that fact in each instance of suffering in the mind, and after a while you'll begin to see the larger patterns. Ultimately, as the Buddha says, you'll reach a point where you've comprehended the whole thing, the whole problem of suffering at the same time that you've let go of all of the causes of suffering. You've developed the path to its total fullness. That's the end of the search.

But even though that particular search is ended, you've still got the tools that you used to overcome your own problems. Now you can use them—to whatever extent you have energy and time—to help show other people how they can start developing their own tools, too.

So what it comes down to is always being willing to learn, developing the tools you need to learn. Develop skill in using them and then learn to enjoy figuring out how to keep on using them, whatever the situation. That's the attitude that'll see you through.