

The Right Medicine

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They say there are 84,000 sections to the Canon. That's a huge number of teachings. Printed out, they come to 45 volumes in all. It's best to think of the Canon as a big medicine chest. You don't need all the medicines in the chest. You need to figure out what your disease is, and which are the right medicines for your disease. That should be your primary concern.

So when you look into the teachings, it's important that you bring in a clear notion of what your problem is. Of course, the big problem we all share is that we're suffering: We suffer because of our craving, and we have craving because of ignorance. Sometimes we're ignorant that we're suffering, or exactly what the suffering is. We know that there's pain in our lives, but the question is: What kind of pain is important? Some people are really concerned about physical pain, but the Buddha said, No, the big problem is the suffering and stress in the mind. That's what you've got work on. It's caused by craving, and there is a way to put an end to it. You put an end to the craving by following the noble eightfold path.

That much is easy to know. That's called the Dhamma of study, *pariyattidhamma*. But then you've got to put it into practice, what they call *patipattidhamma*, to see exactly where your suffering is and, when the craving comes, exactly *how* the craving comes. This is where the path comes in. You've got to get the mind really still so that you can see these things in action.

That's why we work with the breath, both because the breath can be very calming—it can provide a good, steady foundation for the mind so that it can stay continually in the present and feel content to stay in the present—and also because the breath is about as close as you get to the mind without actually focusing on the mind itself. It's the closest physical sensation in the body. It's the mind's connection with the body. Without the breath, you wouldn't feel anything in the body at all.

When you're with the breath, you're very close to the mind and you begin to see the movements of the mind—all the intricate feedback loops. These loops are why you need so many different kinds of medicine, because different people can get caught up in different loops, and even the same person can get caught in different loops at different times. But there are two big issues that are constant and common to everybody. One is this problem of ignorance, and the other is the issue of your intentions: the movements of the mind based on your views, based on your understanding of things, as to what to do. Simply knowing the four noble

truths in the sense of having heard them or read about them is a good place to start on the practice, but it can't be the end of practice in and of itself. You've got to take those four categories and apply them to what's actually happening. Each of those categories has a duty. You want to comprehend suffering, to let go of its origination, to realize its cessation, and to develop the path to its cessation.

You work here on the path so that you can perform all those duties as well. Like right now, you're working on the concentration. Concentration is not just a matter of forcing the mind into stillness. You have to gain some understanding as well. As the Buddha said, both samatha, tranquility and vipassana, insight, are necessary to get the mind to settle down in right concentration. He didn't draw a clear distinction between samatha practice and vipassana practice. They're qualities of mind you need to bring to the process of stilling the mind. Without any understanding of the mind, your concentration may be strong but it's not necessarily right concentration. And in the process of bringing it to stillness, you learn things about the mind.

In fact, there's a whole sutta, the Shorter Sutta on Emptiness, which shows how you should use insight to bring the mind from one state of concentration to a deeper state of concentration. One way of doing is through understanding the concentration you've been indulging in, enjoying—and the Buddha says to enjoy it, indulge in it. That's an important part of concentration. But there is a point where you begin to see that there's still disturbance within that concentration, and so you track down the disturbance to let go of it. As it turns out, the disturbance is not extraneous to the concentration, it's built into that level of concentration, it's built into the perception that keeps you on that level: How you perceive the breath, how you perceive your focus of the mind in relation to the breath, can really determine what level of concentration you hit.

For example, if you see the breath as something you've got to pull in and push out through the nose, it's hard to achieve a really deep level of concentration going with that perception. But if you think of the breath as an energy that's there in the body and is augmented by energy coming in and out the pores, it changes your relationship to the energy field of the body, making it a lot more spacious and easeful, which makes it a lot easier for the mind to settle down.

So when you compare two levels of concentration, you see that the disturbance in the lower level was actually part of the concentration: the way you perceive things on that level. When you understand that, then you can let go of that perception and go to a deeper level of concentration.

This is one of the ways in which you learn about the mind: by trying to bring it into deeper and deeper levels of stillness. And in that process, you're already applying the four noble truths.

The noble truths aren't just ideas to think about, they're categories to apply to your present experience. You get a state of concentration going and then look at: Where is the stress? You see what's causing it, an act of craving to perceive in a particular way. So you let go of that craving. Then you move into another level of concentration. There's going to be craving for that level of concentration as well, but it's more subtle. You let yourself stay there for a while, to enjoy the more refined level of peace, and then you look to see what disturbance is still there. And so on down the line through the levels of concentration.

This is concentration developed through discernment or concentration developed through what they call *vimansa*, which can be translated as your powers of analysis, ingenuity, basically the active side of the intellect.

So concentration isn't always just a matter of forcing things into stillness. Sometimes, to develop it, you have to examine it. This requires a certain amount of balance. If you analyze it too much, you destroy it. If you don't analyze enough, you tend to just drop into a state that's still, but there's not much insight, not much mindfulness, just a dull state. You've got to learn how to combine things to get the right balance.

This is how you find which medicine is just right for you at any particular time.

All of this is called the Dhamma of practice. Ultimately, it leads to a point where you let go of all your attachments, all your cravings. In other words, you get to the point where you can see all the subtle intentions of the mind and you see them so clearly that you sense the stress that each of them carries, each of them causes, and you get to the point where you realize that you have to drop all intentions if you want the mind to be really still. That's a tricky thing, because the intention to drop the intention turns into another intention, but it doesn't always have to be that way. There can be an opening out of that impasse. That's when you see what the teaching is all about. There really is an end to suffering. And you can find it through looking at your own intentional actions.

This is why intention is so central in the Buddha's teachings on dependent co-arising. It's there under name and form, one of the very early factors in the sequence. Once that factor is pulled out, through applying the four noble truths, all the other factors, like a chain reaction, get pulled out as well. And you see what for the Buddha taught was really true. There is a deathless. This is called the Dhamma of attainment, *pativedha-dhamma*. This is what it's all about.

Now, to get there, different people will apply different aspects of the teaching. This is why the Buddha maps everything out in such a complex way. But you don't need to know the whole map. It's like driving from here to San Francisco. You don't need to know all the roads that lead to Lake Tahoe, or to go up to Manchester, or head over to Phoenix. You just need to know the road that takes you to San Francisco.

So when you look at the Buddha's teachings, remember this is what it's all about. There are maps, there are all kinds of complex sets of teachings, but the essential thing is to see what exactly is your problem, and which of the teachings is appropriate for what you're going through right now, and then apply it.

This is why in the past a lot of Buddha's arahant disciples had to then learn more of the Dhamma after they had gained awakening. They had learned their particular route, but if they were going to teach, they needed to know other routes as well. The important point is that you always should put the teaching to the purpose for which it is intended: the end of suffering. All the teachings are skillful means for that end. All the teachings are meant to be taken as strategies. Once you've used the strategies and gotten the proper results, you really are going to cherish them. You see that this is the most precious medicine that human beings can pass on to one another: knowledge of these strategies. But to really appreciate them, you've got to see the results yourself. In other words, take the medicine and see that the disease really does disappear. That's when you become a real strong supporter of that particular medicine.

That's what keeps the Dhamma alive so that it's not just a historical curiosity. It's not just a game. It actually leads to seeing the end of suffering, when the Dhamma turns from study to practice and then on to attainment. That's the life of the Dhamma. And it's something worth giving your life to as well.