

The True Cause of Suffering

January 20, 2011

Years back, they were holding the commemoration of Ajaan Lee's passing away, and they invited a monk from Bangkok to give a Dhamma talk. As the time approached for the talk, he hadn't shown up. We got a phone call saying he was stuck in traffic and didn't think he'd be able to make it in time. So they got another monk, an ajaan from the North-east, to get up and give the talk.

The talk was about how the Buddha's central teaching was about suffering: how everybody suffers and that's the big issue in life.

Just as he was finishing the talk, the monk from Bangkok drove up and so they invited him to give a talk right after that.

He hadn't heard the first talk, so he got up and said that the Buddha's teachings are all about happiness.

It may sound like there's a conflict there, but they were both right. We are faced with the problem of suffering in life, but there is a path to happiness in the midst of all that suffering. To follow the path, though, we have to relearn our ideas about what happiness is. To do that, we also have to understand what suffering is: why we suffer. We don't suffer because we don't have enough money; we don't suffer because we don't have enough friends. That's not the true cause of suffering. The true cause of suffering is that we're looking for happiness in the wrong places.

What are the right places? The right places are in developing good qualities of mind, so that the mind can be trained to handle whatever comes up and not suffer from it. When good things happen, we don't suffer from the good things. When bad things happen, we don't suffer from the bad things—because the mind has its own independent source of happiness, which is what we're working on as we meditate.

There is a deathless element that can be touched by the mind. If you dig down here in the present moment, you'll find it. You don't create it by digging, but you get there by digging. And just knowing that that possibility is there is like knowing that there's gold buried under your house. Knowing that it's there gives you some sense of security, but you can't really get the most out of it until you actually dig down.

This is why we have to work at the meditation, to see what's getting in the way. It's like digging down and finding rocks and other things in the way. You have to keep chipping away at the rocks. You can't give up. And you can't decide, "Well, there are rocks here. Maybe I'll dig down someplace else where there is no rocks." The gold is right here, so you've got to dig down right here.

As you're digging down, you might find some obstacles. The main ones are called the hindrances. These are five qualities of mind that get in the way, that block the mind's ability to settle down in concentration and to gain discernment, to gain insight, and to gain release. So you have to know the antidotes for them.

The first big block is sensual passion, our desire for sensual pleasures, our fascination with sensual pleasures. It's a block because as soon as you get involved in one of these desires, you're off someplace else in some very imaginary worlds. Our pleasures around sensuality depend an awful lot on dreams and fantasies, and have very little to do with the actual pleasures.

Think about going out for a meal, say, and you can fantasize for quite a bit about how nice the meal is going to be. After the meal's over, you can think about how nice the atmosphere was and how good the food was and all these other things. But the actual taste of the meal, what was really pleasant, that little taste on your tongue, didn't last very long. On top of that, you had to pay for the meal. And now you've got to digest it. And in some cases that works, and some cases it doesn't. Some good-tasting foods can make you really sick.

So to make up for the fact that it's such a fleeting pleasure, we spin and weave all kinds of fantasies around it. You have to look at those sensual pleasures as being very brief and momentary, and see the drawbacks of having a mind that's totally dependent on them. If you can be happy only when things are really perfect, you don't have much chance for happiness at all, because things are never quite perfect. In fact, they're often very far from perfect. So remind yourself that that's not where you're going to find happiness. You've got to find it here in training the mind.

The next obstacle or the next hindrance is ill-will. You think of people who've been hurtful to you, people who've been mean to people you like and love, and you think about how much you'd like to see them suffer. You have to stop and realize that you gain nothing from the suffering of other people. And often, when people are suffering, they tend to do even crazier things. A lot of the evil that happens in the world is when people feel threatened. So you gain nothing by allowing yourself to get caught up in thoughts of ill-will.

This is why one of the main meditation topics is to develop thoughts of goodwill in their place. It's not just kind of a "pretend-you-like-people" kind of practice. In your mind, you go through all the people you might think of that you really don't like and deep down inside would like to see them suffer, and then you ask yourself: What would you really gain?

And what state of mind are *you* in when you think about wanting their suffering? Learn to look at that carefully until you decide that that's not where you want to go.

In addition to goodwill, the Buddha has you develop thoughts of compassion and empathetic joy. Compassion is a sense of seeing other people suffering and really feeling sorry that they're suffering. Or seeing people doing the things that will lead them to suffer, and feeling sorry for them. In other words, you see them doing unskillful things but instead of getting upset at them for doing unskillful things, you feel sorry for them. That's the best way to approach other people who are acting in unskillful ways. If you set yourself up as their enemy, they'll immediately raise their defenses. But if you can view them with compassion, it's a lot easier to talk to them, maybe even to change their ways.

As for people who are already happy or are doing skillful things, you're not jealous of their happiness, you don't resent it. Because, after all, that means if someday you gain happiness there, will be people who resent *your* happiness. Do you want that? Well, no. It doesn't help anything in the world at all. So you develop empathetic joy, taking pleasure in the goodness and happiness of others.

And finally the Buddha has you develop equanimity in order to overcome feelings of irritation, that little sense of dislike inside. You have to keep reminding yourself that other people's bad habits really shouldn't impinge on your happiness. They shouldn't have an impact. The little things that people do to irritate you—whether they do them intentionally to irritate you or not: You have to learn how to develop equanimity, the ability to rise above it, and keep your mind on an even keel.

Remind yourself that those little irritations are just that: little irritations. They get larger because you gather up the memory of how many times people have irritated you in the past or you wonder how much longer this irritation is going to go on. You're suddenly weighing down the present moment, which is quite small, with all this massive past and future. No wonder the present moment breaks. Even more so if you're weighing it down with memories of past large irritations, times when people were really cruel or mean. So you want to develop equanimity along with patience. Realizing that you don't have to relive the past. All you need to do is deal with the irritation right now: That's all you have to think about. Past irritations are gone. Past cruelties are gone. You don't want to gather them up.

Ajaan Lee has an image of someone who's plowing the field and instead of just letting the soil fall off the plow, they put it in a bag as they plow—and you can imagine how heavy that bag is going to get over time. So you don't want to carry all these heavy bags around with you. Let the past just be in the past. You don't have to carry it around in the present.

In this way, you develop attitudes that help you deal with all the various shades of irritation, anger, jealousy, resentment that can actually lead up to ill-will. And you've removed one limitation from the mind.

Sloth, drowsiness, torpor: That's another hindrance. In cases where the body really is tired, you have to let it rest, but a lot of times that's not the problem. The mind is just bored. It doesn't want to stay here. It wants to come up with excuses to go someplace else. And so it can convince you that you're sleepy. You've got to fight that.

The primary way is that if you find a particular way of breathing is putting you to sleep, change the way you breathe: Breathe more deeply; breathe more heavily. Explore the sensations of breathing in different parts of the body. Move your focus around. There was one time when I was looking after Ajaan Fuang and I had the 2 a.m. to 8 p.m. shift. As you can imagine, around 3 a.m. I was pretty tired. But I found that if I would focus on one spot for three breaths and then another spot a few inches away for three breaths and then another spot a few inches away for three breaths and kept moving my attention like that, it helped keep me awake. So that's another possibility you might want to try.

If you really have trouble sitting here and find yourself drifting off, you might want to get up and go outside to do some walking meditation. See if that wakes you up. If you find

that you're still drowsy, then it's a sign that the body probably does need some rest, so you allow it to rest, but with the thought in mind that as soon as you wake up you're going to get up. You're not going to stay wallowing around in the pleasure of lying down. Get up and give the mind a chance to start meditating again.

The fourth obstacle is restlessness and anxiety. You start worrying about things. The mind can convince itself that it really has to worry about x, really has to prepare for some future danger. But a lot of our worrying doesn't really prepare us for anything. It just wears us down. If there is some future danger you've got to deal with, give yourself some time to think about it, preferably at the end of the meditation. But notice when your thinking is going nowhere and you're just spinning your wheels. That's time to stop and come back to the breath, with the thought that regardless what's going to happen in the future— and there is so little you really know about the future—you are going to need strong powers of mindfulness, alertness, and discernment to deal with unforeseen circumstances. And that's what you're developing right here: mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment—the skills you'll need. So as you're meditating, you're not running away from your future responsibilities. You're actually preparing yourself to deal with them more effectively.

The final hindrance is doubt, uncertainty. You wonder about whether it's really worth meditating after all; whether you're able to do it. As the Buddha says, the best way to overcome that kind of doubt is not with blind conviction. You need to have conviction in the principle that your actions really do make a difference, but that's not asking you to believe in anything impossible or illogical. The Buddha gained his awakening by using qualities that you already have in a potential form. And you start actually looking at what's going on in the mind. Instead of branding your mind as innately good or innately bad, just look at what comes up in terms of its effect. If you think certain thoughts, where are they going to lead you? A good place or a bad place? Watch for their effect.

You begin to realize that you do have the power to step back a bit and pass judgment on your own thoughts and judge them accurately—which means that you're not a slave to them. You can begin to see for yourself the good effect it has in your life.

In other words, the Buddha doesn't have you overcome doubt by pledging blind allegiance. He has you actually look at what's going on in the mind and realize that you have the power to distinguish what's skillful from what's unskillful—and that ability is going to develop over time.

So these are some of the ways of getting past those rocks and other obstacles standing in the way of the gold. If you find yourself up against a rock, try to identify which kind of rock it is, and make sure you have the proper tool for digging around it, digging through it.

That way you can test if the Buddha's challenge—that it is possible with human powers to develop a true happiness—is really true. Because the only way you're going to know is if you test yourself. And he gives you advice on how to test yourself: what powers you're going to need, what exercises you can practice in order to develop the skills where you really can see for yourself. That way you'll be able to see in a reliable way whether that possibility of true happiness really is possible.

