

Right Here

March 31, 2012

When you focus on the breath, you want to focus as much as possible on the direct experience of the breath, how it feels directly to you. When you breathe in, where do you feel it? To what extent does your perception of the breath, the ideas, the whole range of ideas you have about where the breath is and what it's doing: To what extent do those perceptions actually get in the way of directly experiencing the breath? This is one of those questions you want to keep in mind. Because the Buddha's teachings are all about how you directly experience what's going on in your mind, in your body.

As he said, all he taught was stress and the end of stress. The word for stress, *dukkha*, can also mean suffering, pain, the whole range from the very slightest element of stress to really out and out heavy suffering. The word *dukkha* covers it all. The stress that you're experiencing right now, nobody else can tap into it to know exactly how much you're experiencing or where you're experiencing it. It's something you know directly only for yourself. And even here it's possible for us, our ideas about it to get in the way: to amplify it, to minimize it, to deny it. But as much as possible, the Buddha tries to get us to look directly at it. That's the nature of all of his teachings. When he talks about dependent co-arising, he's not talking about the workings of causes behind the scenes. He's talking about how one event in your experience accompanies another event: the things that you see happening together. He calls the basic principle for causality, "this, that conditionality." In fact, it's "this, this conditionality." You see this and it's connected with this, right here, with each "this" referring to things you're directly experiencing. This is why the evidence for how the practice works is something you know only for yourself.

People can see the outside ramifications of the practice—in other words, the extent to which you're creating suffering for yourself inside is going to start showing in your actions—but the ultimate test is something that you can know only for yourself. When they try to make scientific studies of pleasure or pain, they have no way of measuring it. They can ask you to measure your pain on a scale from one to ten, but that's pretty meaningless—which means that all the numbers that they crunch around these topics in positive psychology and other sciences devoted to pleasure and pain start with garbage. And when you start with garbage, what do you end up with? Nothing more than crunched garbage.

Your evidence for how well the practice is working is something that you know, directly, but you have to be honest with yourself. This is one of the main requirements of the teaching. The Buddha said, "Bring me a person who is honest and observant, and I'll teach that person the Dhamma. It doesn't matter whether you're a man, woman, or child. Your honesty and your ability to be observant is what matters, and what makes all the difference. Because it *is* possible to lie to yourself about the stress you're feeling on the one hand, and what you're doing to cause it on the other. It's very easy to be unwilling to look at these things, or if you see them, to try to cover them up.

When I first came back to the States, I had to go together with Ajaan Suwat to an abbot's meeting. On the way back on the plane, the other person in our line of three seats probably could tell immediately that we were Buddhist monks just by looking at us. He had probably heard that Buddhism talks about suffering—because just out of nowhere he turned to us and said, "I don't have any suffering in my life." Then he proceeded to talk about his life. And I kept thinking to myself that this person was awfully deluded in the extent to which he was denying his suffering. To begin with he was living in Blythe, in one of the hottest, ugliest parts of the desert. He had a car dealership and he had one son in jail and a daughter who had been made pregnant by a junkie. And neither the junkie nor the daughter was mature enough or responsible enough to raise the child, so the grandparents had to raise a child that had been damaged in the womb by its mother's drug habit. Yet he kept on insisting that he had no suffering in his life. I suppose that one way of getting through a lot of that stuff is to put a good face on all kinds of bad things. But it means that you're never really going to get down to the real reasons for why there is suffering. The man's attitude was that if you grin and bear it enough, then what you're bearing is not suffering. But that's not really true. The suffering grinds you down.

So the Buddha wanted someone who was honest and observant: honest enough to admit when there was suffering, and observant enough to want to look around and see what was happening together with the suffering. What actions were you doing when there was suffering? What things did you stop doing when the suffering stopped? This is what you've got to see. It's also something that's right there, directly in your own experience.

The formal term for this in Western philosophy is *phenomenology*, looking at your experience directly as experience and not paying attention to what may or may not lie behind it. Phenomenology is a big word, but it basically means looking directly, right here, learning to be observant right here. In some ways it seems to make your experience a little bit more two-dimensional. You're not trying to imagine the things behind it on either side, either things out there in the world that lie behind your experiences of the senses, or what's inside here, behind your awareness. You just directly at the experience: these sensations right here, right now. This feeling of the breath, of the bodily sensations.

When the Buddha talks about form, this is what he's talking about: your sense of the body as felt from within. Earth, water, wind, and fire are all names for the properties of solidity, liquidity or coolness, energy, and warmth that make up your sense of the body's presence right here. It's good to have this kind of vocabulary to analyze this sense of presence, because in the West we're very impoverished in our vocabulary about how you experience the body from within.

That's form. Then there are the other aggregates: feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness. This may seem like a strange way of dividing up the activities of the mind, but they're actually related to the direct way you experience one of the mind's basic activities: the way it feeds.

One of the main analogies the Buddha gives for how the mind acts is feeding. The mind feeds on sensory contact, intentions, and acts of consciousness in way a similar to the way the body feeds on physical food. There are a lot of similarities there, but one of

the primary things that's worth focusing on is the extent to which your awareness is not passive. It's active. You're out looking for things to feed on.

The act of feeding provides the Buddha's main analogy for causality, and these aggregates—which are activities—are directly involved in that act. First there's the feeling of hunger, the sense of pain and lack that drives the quest to feed on the one hand, and the hoped-for feeling of fullness and pleasure that comes when you've fed properly on something. As for perception, it identifies precisely what the lack is inside and what you're going to need to feed on to fill up that lack. It also identifies what's edible, what's not edible, what's right or not right for that particular hunger. Fabrication consists of your plans for how you're going to go about eating and then when you find something, what you're going to do with it so that you can actually eat it. When you get an egg, for instance, you can't just stick the raw egg, shell and all, into your mouth. You've got to figure out what to do with it. Crack the shell, get the contents out. Then what do you do with them? You cook them. That's fabrication.

And then consciousness is your awareness of these activities.

This analysis applies not only to eating physical food, but also to the way you eat emotional food. You feel a need for some sort of companionship and so you look around. What companionship is going to give you the pleasure you want? And you have certain perceptions about what your needs are. That's what you see when you look at personal ads and they say, I'd like such and such a person. They're exposing their perceptions of what kind of food they want. Then there's your fabrication, all the stories you create about what's going to happen when you find your ideal person. Then usually when you find somebody who may to some extent meet those requirements, or your ideas about what your requirements are, and you want to change or influence the person so that he or she will comply with your needs. And then of course there's the awareness of all this going on.

A lot of relationships are just this: each person trying to change the other person so that the other person will provide good emotional food. And as long as there's a sense of that both sides are feeding and getting something out of it, the relationship lasts. But then, of course, there are relationships where the feeding is unhealthy. Or one side is getting all the nourishment and the other side is not getting any nourishment at all. Those relationships are disastrous. And especially when you get the sense that you're not gaining anything out of the relationship, that the other person is just feeding off of you. That's when you begin to realize how oppressive it is to be fed on.

But what the Buddha wants us to look at is just that fact: that the need to feed and the process of feeding are, in and of themselves, stressful. We were chanting just now the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, the Buddha's very first sermon, in which he describes clinging to the five aggregates as the essence of suffering. Well, the word for clinging also means feeding. So not only do we have activities that revolve around feeding, we actually feed off of those activities. There are many layers of feeding going on here.

We like feelings so much that we hold on to them. The perceptions, the fabrications, all these other activities that have to go on around feeding: We feed off those activities on many, many levels. And then those activities chew us up in turn.

That's why we suffer. Because we're beings, we've got to feed all the time, and we get chewed up in turn.

So the Buddha wants you to look directly at these activities, and the suffering they entail, as you experience them. Even when you've got a good source of food, you know it's not going to last forever. So there's a constant sense of lack, there's a constant sense of instability. As long as the mind has these needs or can't get to a point where it no longer has these needs, it's going to suffer. This is what the training is all about is: getting the mind in a position where it finds a happiness that doesn't require feeding.

That's why, when the Buddha was looking for the solution to his problem, the solution of suffering, he knew he had to find something that was deathless, that was free from conditions that would end. And, as he discovered, it had to be an experience outside of space and time.

That too can be directly experienced. He talks about touching the deathless with the body. This is not to say that it's a physical contact like heat, or cold. There *is* a sense of coolness that goes along with it, but the point is the fact that it's not an experience just in your head. You experience it right here, right here where you're sensing your body right now, at this very direct level of experience.

So this is where you want to look. You want to really get very familiar with this territory. Notice how, within this territory, there is a felt sense that you need to feed. Look for the qualities you can develop within this direct experience that will strengthen the mind through such qualities as conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment.

As things settle down through these strengths, you can see precisely how the mind is feeding, as it goes from one moment to the next, to the next, to the next. You can isolate that activity and see that it's inherently stressful. That's how you develop dispassion for it and just drop it. That's when you open up to the happiness that doesn't require any feeding.

So everything we're looking for is right here. The problem is right here. The solution to the problem is also right here. And it's learning how to look at things right here honestly, and using your powers of observation in ways that are going to stretch them a great deal: That's how you find the end of suffering right here.