

The Buddha Meant What He Said

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The Buddha said several times that all he taught was stress and the end of stress, or suffering and the end of suffering—however you want to translate *dukkha*. His very first sermon started with the topic of stress and suffering. His last teaching was on the path to the end of suffering. He really meant what he said. The issue of what causes suffering and how you can put an end to it: that was *the* central question, *the* central issue of his teaching.

Too many of us don't believe him. We want to use the teaching to answer other questions. "What is the true nature of the world?" "What is the nature of my self?" Those are the questions that the Buddha would have you put aside because those are not the problem—aside from the fact that you get entangled in them and create problems for yourself by getting entangled in them. But answering those questions is not going to solve the problem.

You want to dig further back and see what it is that makes you want an answer to these questions. It doesn't take too much to trace it back to the issue of suffering and stress again. So we have to keep these issues of suffering and stress, and the cause of suffering and stress, in mind all the time while we practice—because the cause is something we're doing. The big question is not, "Who am I?" or "Where am I?" It's "What am I doing?"—with the emphasis on the *doing*.

Even before the Buddha taught about the four noble truths, he taught that these truths are part of an eightfold path. It's a path of action to help you understand action. You're going to learn something about yourself as you see yourself in action. But the big issue is just that: What are you doing that's causing stress? And how can you stop?

This is why the very first instructions the Buddha gave to Rahula were to look at his actions as he would look into a mirror. You look in a mirror to clean your face, and you look

into your actions in this way to clean your mind by looking at what you're doing, what your intention is, and what the actual results of your actions are. If you see that your intention is to cause harm, or the action you're planning to do is going to cause harm, you don't do it. If, while you're doing something, you watch and see that you actually are causing harm, you stop. If you realize that an action you've done has caused harm—and we're talking about actions in thought, word and deed—then you resolve not to repeat the mistake. If it's something you did or said, you go talk it over with somebody else who's further on the path.

The whole point of this is to look at your actions and take that as your main focus. I've talked to some people who find these instructions tedious. It's like Lucy in that old Peanuts cartoon when she says, "If you go around watching everything you say, you never get much said." But that's the whole point. What you're doing, what you're saying, what you're thinking: That's your contribution to the world. That's your contribution to the ongoing process of your life. You want to make sure it's a good contribution. And you can learn from your actions. It's not that each moment is so fresh and unprecedented that you can't learn from the past. You learn from your mistakes and you learn not to repeat them. You learn from the times you did something right and see that as part of your progress on the path.

The same principle applies to your meditation. You're trying to bring the mind to concentration. It *is* an activity. It's something you're doing. You get the mind in concentration and try to maintain that. That, too, is an activity. You want to get good at it so that you can watch it. It's like someone who's really good at a physical skill: a sport, a musical instrument, carpentry, dancing, being an acrobat. The Buddha would often use skills as analogies for his teachings to help explain what he was trying to get you to do with your mind. But in all cases, it's getting the mind to be skillful in its inner actions so that you can see clearly what happens as a result of what you're doing when your focus is skillful and when it's not.

There's a sutta where the Buddha talks about all the various mistakes you can make—and he made them. He noticed: Okay, why is it that my mind is not settling down? Why is it not bright and clear? What's the problem? And he would notice that either he was putting too much effort in or too little. He was clamping down too tightly or he was letting things go too loosely. That's where he uses the image of the quail. If you hold it too tightly, it's going to die; if you hold it too loosely, it's going to fly away. He goes down all the different things that can get in the way of your concentration. There's sloth and torpor; there's doubt; there's inattention.

So as he noticed that he was doing x and that was the problem, he would stop doing x. This is how he trained himself. It wasn't like he had a map where he had the teachings all laid out before him. It was trial and error. And always, the question was: Something's wrong here, so what am I *doing* that's wrong? What can I do to correct for that? The emphasis is not on placing blame on others, or on what you're innate nature is. It's always on your actions. Even when things are going well, the question is, "What am I doing?"

The Buddha talks about going from one level of concentration to another. First you settle into into a particular level, whatever you can manage. Then you indulge in it. In other words, you learn how to enjoy it, because one of the purposes of concentration is to give you nourishment on the path. You gain a sense of pleasure, a sense of rapture or refreshment. These things are the lubricant that keeps the path going smoothly. If you lack the lubricant, things dry out pretty quickly and, like an engine without a lubricant, the practice begins to seize up.

But then, when you're really settled in that state of concentration and have allowed it to nourish the body and mind, you look at it and ask yourself, "Where is there still a disturbance there?" Notice the question isn't, "Who am I?" or "What does this tell me about the world?" The question is, "What am I doing? What's the disturbance? What am I doing that's disturbing my own concentration?" Then, as he points

out again and again, it's usually the perception that's holding you there.

There are different levels of subtlety in your perception of the breath. There's the in-and-out breath; that's one level of subtlety. Then there's the sense of the breath as an energy suffusing your whole nervous system, flowing with the in-breath, flowing with the out-breath. Then there's the perception of a really still and solid energy—which also counts as breath even though it doesn't move—that underlies all this. You have to perceive this and hold the perception in mind. That takes you to more and more subtle levels of concentration.

Similarly with the formless levels of concentration. You find that one perception, when you put it aside, is replaced by another that's more refined, less disturbing to the mind. You're not dealing with blatant stress and suffering, but there is a little level of disturbance in the concentration that's caused by what you're doing. So that's what the question always is when you settle in: "Okay, what can I do to gain benefit from this concentration? And what can I learn about what's still disturbing the mind in this concentration?" You're always looking at your actions, actions, actions, because your actions are causing stress even though there's only a subtle level of stress at this point.

So when you keep that in mind—"Where is the stress? What am I doing to cause the stress?"—you're right in line with what the Buddha said his teachings were all about: stress and how to put an end to it. Because when you see you're doing something that's causing stress, you also want to see how it's unnecessary. That enables you to stop. That's what it means to let go; you stop doing things that are causing stress. And you try not to get entangled in issues of "Who am I?" or "What is the world?" You begin to see your sense of self as a kind of activity, another action that's causing a disturbance to the mind.

There was a German philosopher, Schlegel, who talked about how the whole purpose of philosophy was to learn how to define yourself, and then you would begin to realize that defining yourself was the activity that defined you. It's too

bad that he stopped there and didn't take it further. He thought that he had had a great insight. It was a good insight as far as it went, but it could go further. The question is: Well, what's accomplished by this act of self-definition when you find that it's causing a lot of stress and suffering? You learn how to put that question of self-definition aside and instead question your reasons for asking it. As you come to the practice, remember: Always try to bring the right questions. As for your other questions, you can leave them at the door for the time being.

Answer this one question: Why is there stress, and what can you do to put an end to it? If you find, after you're done with that question, that you still have other questions, then you're free to pursue them, as you like. But as Ajaan Suwat said: Once you've found the ultimate happiness that comes when you've totally unraveled this issue of suffering and stress, the experience is so total, you're not really worried about who's experiencing it. It's that sufficient in and of itself.

And as the Buddha said, people who've gained awakening don't ask these questions anymore, and they don't try to answer them—the questions of who am I, what's the nature of the world, or whatever. They've learned to see through them as activities that cause stress, things they don't have to get engaged in anymore.

So take the Buddha at his word—that that's all he taught: stress and the end of stress, or suffering and the end of suffering—and you'll benefit from it.