

Clinging to Karmic Diarrhea

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For the mind to settle down, you have to find something it likes, something it finds engaging. This is entirely up to you. If it's the breath, what kind of breathing do you like? Where do you like to focus on the breath? What kind of perception of the breath helps you settle down? This is something you have to evaluate for yourself. If not the breath, then what other topic do you find engaging? It's important that you find something you like and that you figure out what the mind likes.

The Buddha compares meditating to being a cook. The wise, experienced cook notices how to read the person he's feeding to see if the person likes salty food, sweet food, bitter food, or sour food—and then provides more and more of whatever the person likes. That kind of cook, as the Buddha said, gets a reward. If you don't know how to read the person you're feeding, you're not going to get any reward. The reward in concentration, of course, is that the mind gets to settle down and has a sense of refreshment, a sense of well-being that comes from the meditation.

There are lots of books to tell you different techniques, and it's up to you to find the ones that work for you. You have to learn how to use your powers of evaluation to get to know your own mind, and this is a necessary part of developing discernment.

We're here to comprehend suffering. That's one of the duties we have with regard to the four noble truths—and, as the Buddha said, to comprehend means to develop a sense of dispassion.

You might think, "Why would we be passionate for suffering?" The problem is that there's a side to suffering we like. In other words, the things that we do that cause suffering hold some appeal for us, and our basic attitude is that it's worth the effort. We get some sort of satisfaction, some sort of gratification out of these things that we do. And we learn how to turn a blind eye to the stress and suffering they cost. As the Buddha said, this is why we cling to things. They do have a pleasant side. He didn't say that the five aggregates were totally painful. If they were totally painful, we wouldn't cling to them. It's because we find there's some pleasure there, and we figure that it's worth it: That's why we cling.

The figuring is where we're pretty weak.

Psychologists who study the way people go about trying to find happiness have observed that people are very poor judges of what actually makes them happy. People can know that the odds are stacked against them. They can know that there's a lot of suffering involved in something, and yet they still go for it. A couple of years back I was reading a piece by a native of Las Vegas saying that one of the things he liked about Las Vegas was how honest everybody was. He meant it ironically, of course, but he gave an example. They put up billboards that say, "90% payback rate." They're telling you right up front: You give them a dollar and they'll give you 90 cents back. And yet people still go for it.

So a lot of the meditation is learning how not to go for those things, learning to read the effort that goes into what you're doing and the pleasure that comes out of it, and trying to evaluate in a clear-minded way whether it's worthwhile or not. Because in comprehending suffering to develop dispassion and disenchantment, you're passing judgment: You're evaluating things and deciding whether they're worth it or not. If your powers of evaluation are weak, you'll do a lot of things that will cause a lot of unnecessary suffering, and there's not much to show for it.

Years ago, when I first went to Thailand before I ordained, I was teaching in Chiang Mai. And once a week, a group of us would get together and buy some Northern Thai food and have a picnic. One

person would go to one market and get this curry; another person would go to that market and get the barbecued chicken or whatever. Then the next day, after our picnic, everybody would have diarrhea. But the very next week, we went back and did it again. It was pretty foolish. We did it for the taste of the food, but after the food got swallowed, the taste was gone. We had nothing to show for our efforts. A few years later, after I was ordained, I was staying at Rayong. And I was still getting diarrhea—at least twice a week. There was no specific food I could trace it back to, but it seemed to be part of the occupational hazard of being a monk in Thailand. And that was worth it. Here I was going to stay with Ajahn Fuang, learning how to train my mind, so I was going to have to put up with some hardships, and that was one of them.

So what we're doing as we're meditating is learning how to judge which kind of diarrhea is worth the effort. After all, the Buddha said that the five aggregates, when you cling to them, are suffering. Yet this path we're following is also made out of five aggregates. The concentration we're doing right now has form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness—all right here. We want to get to see that when we put these aggregates together in this way, even though they do involve effort and there is some pain in the practice, it's worth the effort so that we can look dispassionately at other, more blatant forms of suffering.

This is a lot of what concentration is about, getting the mind still enough and with a good enough sense of well-being—refreshment from the meditation—that we're in a better position to see: What are we doing that's causing stress? And why are we so addicted to it? And can we see where it's not worth it? Can we learn how to pass intelligent judgment, to be judicious in our activities?

When the Buddha describes suffering, first he talks about birth, aging, illness, death, not getting what you want, having to be with things you don't like, and having to be separated from things that you do like. The solution, of course, is not just hanging around with things you like all the time. He wants you to dig a little bit deeper, and that's where you see that the common denominator for all kinds of suffering is the five clinging-aggregates: when you have passion and delight in form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness.

Why do you have that passion and delight? That's what the clinging is. The word for clinging, *upādāna*, can also mean that you feed on these things. You're trying to get some nourishment from them, and your mind is developing diarrhea. That's the suffering, and yet you don't see it. At least, you see the pleasure you get out of these things as worth it. But when the mind is well-fed with the concentration, you look at a lot of the activities that held some attraction for you, and you can see that they're not worth it. As the concentration gets more solid and your discernment gets more subtle, you begin to see areas where there was some stress you didn't see before. Again the question is, is it worth it? We're learning how to be more skilled in passing judgment, in evaluating things.

All too often, we hear that meditation is to teach us not to pass judgment, and that makes sense only in the sense of not being judgmental, i.e., jumping to quick conclusions without looking at things carefully. But we look at things and withhold judgment for the time being so that we can pass wise judgment as to what activities are worth it and which ones are not.

There are times when you have to put up with pain in the practice. The Buddha said it's like straightening an arrow. You have to run it between two flames to get out all the kinks. Once the arrow is straight, then you don't need to use the flames any more. In other words, you learn to judge when pain is useful and when it's not. If you see that living by your idea of what's pleasant, what seems useful, is causing unskillful qualities to arise in your mind, you've got to pass judgment on that. You've got to live with some more pain—push yourself harder in the practice. Be willing to sit with pain so that it braces the mind. But if you see that living at your ease is not bad for the mind, okay the Buddha says,

don't reject any pleasure that accords with the Dhamma. And how do you know? You've got to learn how to pass judgment. This is one of the things we're doing as we're getting the mind to settle down: We're learning how to pass judgment on what's working and what's not. This is an important step in developing discernment.

So look at what's working for your mind. Nobody else can step in and say, "This is right and that's wrong. This kind of breathing is too long; that kind of breathing is too short." You've got to learn how to read these things yourself. And when the mind says it likes x, can you believe it? Try it for a while and see what results you get. If it's bad for the mind, again, learn how to read that fact.

When you become sensitive to these things and can learn how to pass judgment wisely, that's when your discernment really grows and really is of use—really makes a difference. Because the whole purpose of this practice is to learn how to stop doing the things that cause us suffering. You have to watch and see: "What am I doing? What are the pleasures that come from it, and what are the pains? Which is more long-term; which is greater? Is it worth it?" These are all value judgments. When you decide it's not worth it any more, it's like deciding that you've had enough of a certain kind of food. That, too, is a value judgment.

We're here to learn how to make those judgments wisely, and that's how we complete the duties in the four noble truths. When you comprehend something to the point of total disenchantment, total dispassion, that's when you let go of the cause. It's because you had craving for that thing that you kept going after it again and again and again—like the Northern Thai food. And you decide the diarrhea is no longer worth anything you want to get involved in again. That's when you let go; that's when you stop creating the suffering.

It's through developing our concentration and our discernment that we can make these judgments wisely. So judging your concentration is actually a good thing. You may find that, in the beginning, your powers of judgment are weak. But with use, they become strong.