

Right View: Feeding Instructions

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When the Buddha first started teaching after his awakening, the first thing he talked about was the problem of suffering or stress and how to put an end to it. The explanations he gave are called right view. In other words, they're a view that you hold in mind because it's effective. It helps direct you as to what to do when you find yourself faced with suffering.

The fact that he made this his first topic and – as he stated many times throughout his career – that everything else he explained was simply a working-out of his first discussion, shows that this problem was not just one problem out of many problems. It is *the* problem that he wanted to address.

It's interesting. Given all the things he learned and saw in his awakening, when the time came to teach, he didn't talk that much about it. As he said, the teachings on suffering were like a handful of leaves, and what he'd learned in his awakening was like a whole forest of leaves. He taught the handful because it was useful, whereas the other leaves in the forest weren't worth passing on. So an important part of adopting right view is not only learning to look at your experience in terms of the four nobles truths, but also realizing that this is *the* important problem. It takes precedence over everything else.

That may sound selfish, focusing on your own suffering, but look at the people in the world. The fact that we're making one another suffer so much is because we start by making ourselves suffer, and we don't understand what we're doing. If we knew how to take care of our own suffering, we wouldn't be a burden on others. So it's not a selfish issue. In fact, all the problems of the world would be cleaned up if everyone could take care of their own suffering. Of course, we can't wait for the whole world to get cleaned up this way, but we can start cleaning up our own corner – the area where we *are* responsible. Notice that the Buddha didn't go around saving other beings, but he did teach them how to solve their own problems. So that's the framework we're trying to bring here.

What is suffering? The Buddha gave a few examples. He talked about the suffering of birth, aging, illness, death, separation from what you love, being together with what you don't love, not getting what you want. All that's relatively familiar. But then when he summarized the problem of suffering, he started talking in terms that weren't familiar. He said "the five clinging-aggregates" – "aggregates" here in the sense of a pile of things from which we take bits and pieces and cobble together our sense of who we are. The fact that we cling to these things: That's what suffering is. The aggregates on their own are not suffering. They arise and pass away and, to that extent, there is a certain amount of stress just in the arising and passing away. But the part that places a burden on the mind is not the aggregates; it's the clinging.

The aggregates are basically activities. The fact that you've got a body is one of the aggregates. Then you've got feeling and perception. Feeling means feeling tone, like pleasure and pain, or neutral feelings of neither pleasure nor pain. Perceptions are the labels you place on things, saying this is this and that is that. Then there's fabrication – the way the mind puts together ideas out of its perceptions, comments on things, asks questions about things, and gives answers. Then there's consciousness, which is aware of all these things.

These are the basic functions by which we identify ourselves. These are also the functions we use in order to feed in the world. The word "clinging" has a connection to the word for "feeding" as well. So suffering is basically an issue of how we go around feeding. We have a feeling of hunger and so we go out and see: What can we identify as the thing we want to feed on that will assuage that hunger? And then we figure out how to get it. That's gut feeling, perception, and fabrication right there. We're engaging in this all the time, not only in terms of physical hunger, but also in terms of mental hunger and emotional hunger. It's how we feed that we suffer.

That's a pretty radical idea because, for most of us, the way we feed is how we find pleasure – it's even how we define ourselves. Ajaan Lee has nice passage where he talks about being able to speak with animals and understand their language. He'd have visions in his meditation where animals would come, animals around the area where he was staying, and the question he found that you could talk about with animals was: How have you been feeding? What did you get to eat today? In the Canon, the Buddha talks about remembering past lives, and the main memories are your pleasure, your pain, and what you got to eat in that particular life.

This issue of feeding looms large in our lives, and we define ourselves around it. That's the problem. The Buddha's not, however, recommending that we starve ourselves. He *does* say, though, to look at what's the cause of this need to feed. There's the craving that keeps making us take on an identity: That's to be abandoned. The suffering itself is to be comprehended. In other words, you learn to watch it and look at it – to understand it. And how are you going to look at suffering? Most of us want to run away from it. This is what the path is for, to give us the strength to stay here and look steadily at suffering.

Particularly, there's right concentration. All the factors of the path are right in the sense that they work. The analogy the Buddha gives is of trying to get oil: There's a right way and there's a wrong way. If you try to squeeze oil out of gravel, you're not going to get any oil. You squeeze oil out of sesame seeds, you'll get oil. It's the same way if you practice adopting right views, and practicing right concentration, and all the other right factors of the path. You get the results. So these things are right not because the Buddha said they were, but because they actually work.

And right concentration is our food. It, too, is made out of those aggregates. You've got the form of the body sitting here. The breath is also counted as form. There are the feelings of ease or dis-ease that come with the breath. Your perceptions of how you think of the breath to

yourself: What image do you hold in mind? When you breathe in, where do you feel the breath? What do you think is happening when you breathe in?

Some people think of their body as a big bellows. When you tell them to allow the breath energy to go to different parts of the body, they think they're going to have to squeeze the air in. Of course, that creates problems. But you could hold a different image in mind: The body is like a big sponge. You breathe in, and the breath energy's coming from everywhere through all the pores of the skin. It's already flowing in some parts of the body, and this is simply a matter of allowing things to connect up so that the energy can flow through the parts where it's blocked. Those are some of the perceptions you can use to help get the mind more concentrated.

Then there's fabrication: the questions you ask about the breath. Is the breath comfortable? Could it be more comfortable? How about this; how about that? You try things – experiment. You get good results? Then start spreading that sense of ease around the body. All of this comes under fabrication. And then there's your awareness of all this, which sometimes is focused *with* these activities and sometimes slips back to other things. But when you learn how to keep at it and get all these things working together, you've got food for the mind. There's going to be a sense of well-being that comes from simply breathing.

Someone once asked, "What is this about Buddhism? You go sit under a tree, and you *breathe*?" Well, yes. You learn what it is to have breath energy in the body. You learn how you can nourish your mind and nourish your body by the way you breathe. It's free medicine that's always available to us but that most of us ignore. It's also free food, just that it takes time to learn how to fix this food so that, instead of feeding off your aggregates in ways that are going to cause suffering, you learn how to turn those aggregates into a path.

One image you can hold in mind is that when you're carrying the aggregates around, it's like bricks that you put in a big sack over your shoulder. When you start practicing, though, you take those bricks, put them down on the ground, arrange them, and they become a path that you can follow. Your relationship to them becomes different. You're still feeding, but you're feeding in a different way. You're feeding more skillfully. And this feeding off the right concentration is what gives you the strength to go back and look at your suffering, to step back from it and say, "Ah, I've been identifying myself with this or that way of feeding off the world." And you can see that it's not worth it. You've got something better. You can make comparisons.

As you do that, you drop a lot of your old ways of feeding. You find you're also dropping a lot of your old ways of suffering – until the mind gets strong enough through the path and you get enough insight into what's going on in the mind, that you reach something in the mind that doesn't need to feed. It's an awareness totally free of conditions. That's when you realize that the Buddha's strategy as a teacher was extremely intelligent – and not just intelligent, but very compassionate. He focused on *the* problem that all of us have.

Here he was, the most awakened being there's ever been in this eon, and he simply wanted us to learn how not to suffer. He wanted to teach us how we can develop the skills not to suffer. That's an extreme act of compassion. Someone once called the Buddhist path "the path of the intelligent heart" – intelligent in the sense that it's really wise. And there's heart there as well. It's not just about figuring things out, but figuring out the problem that weighs most heavily on the human heart.

So as we sit here and meditate, try to keep these thoughts in mind and keep in mind the Buddha's priorities. We make them our own priorities so that we can benefit from his teaching that the way we feed is important. We want to feed a lot more skillfully, and here's the breath to feed on. It's available all day long. It's so easy when you leave the monastery to forget about this; it's easy to forget about it even while you're here at the monastery. You start getting involved in other people's dramas and you start feeding on – it's hard to describe what kind of food that is. You'd get a lot better food right here inside if you let the dramas go past.

Once you learn how to feed wisely and with compassion in what the Buddha pointed out was a totally blameless way, you're lighter inside and you're also less of a burden on the world outside you. The benefits of the practice spread around; they don't just stop with your skin. But you want to keep your awareness here *in* your skin, inside the body right now, so that you really can develop these skills and try to keep these priorities in mind.

This is where your first level of attention should be. This should be the foundation from which you do all your other things – this awareness of the breath energy here in the body – because you're coming from strength when you do this. And it leads to greater and greater strength until, as I said, you reach a point where you find something even better in the mind: a dimension that doesn't need to feed at all, one that's totally blameless, totally pure, totally compassionate – all around.