

Duties

February 7, 2017

Take some good long deep in-and-out breaths and notice where you feel the process of breathing. Allow your attention to settle there. You can change the rhythm of the breath if you like. Try to find a rhythm that feels good. But always try to stay with that sensation of where you feel the breathing.

Because when we talk about doing breath meditation, that's the breath we're focusing on. It doesn't have to be the air coming in and out through the nose. Anyplace where you feel the energy of the breathing process, anyplace where you're especially sensitive to the breathing process—it can be down in the area around the heart, or in the throat, or in the middle of the head—choose your spot. Or you can experiment with different spots for a while until you decide that you prefer one particular spot right now and one particular rhythm of breathing right now. It can be fast or slow, heavy/light, deep/shallow. It's up to you to find a place where you can stay.

Because that's the purpose of this: to stay with the breath and to feel at ease with the breath. If you're not at ease with the breath, it's going to be hard to stay. We have a purpose for meditating. We're not just sitting here watching things arising and passing away and leaving it at that. We want to get the mind to settle down, because when the mind is settled down, it's a lot stronger and a lot clearer. It can see things a lot more clearly and understand what it's doing inside that's creating suffering for itself. After all, that's the message of the four noble truths: There may be pains caused by the world outside—hurtful words, hurtful situations—but the real suffering that stabs at the mind is the suffering we add to things outside.

The Buddha's image is of two arrows. You get shot by one arrow, and that's not enough, you shoot yourself with another arrow. The first arrow is the pain—it could be physical pains, or pains from other people's words or actions. But then there's a second pain, and that comes from your own shooting yourself with the second arrow. You know what it's like if you've ever tried to shoot yourself with an arrow: Just the act of getting the arrow aimed at yourself is painful enough. Then the second arrow goes in and often we're not content with just the second arrow, we add a lot more. That's what we're now trying to get past.

The Buddha talks about suffering or stress on different levels. The word *dukkha* can mean either one. There's the stress of what they call the three characteristics or the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, not-self. The fact that things are inconstant means they're stressful. And if they're stressful, why call them your self? That kind of stress happens to everybody. But that's not the stress that weighs us down. The stress that weighs us down is the stress in the four noble truths, and that's caused by craving—craving combined with clinging and ignorance: in other words, things that are happening in our own mind. The Buddha here is not laying blame on

you, he's just pointing out that if you want to put an end to suffering, you can cure the problem for yourself. This is actually an empowering teaching.

If the end of suffering had to depend on the world outside being perfect, well, it's very far from perfect and it's certainly not going to become perfect in our lifetimes. That would mean that the end of suffering would be beyond us. But the fact that suffering is dependent on conditions of the mind and we can learn how to gain some control over those conditions: That's good news.

That's our purpose in being here, and in line with that purpose we always keep in mind the duties that go with the four noble truths. Stress or suffering is something to be comprehended. Its cause—craving, clinging, and ignorance—is something to be abandoned. We do this so that we can realize the cessation of stress and suffering, which is the relinquishment of those cravings and clings, overcoming that ignorance. And we do that by developing the path.

Now, these are not duties that the Buddha imposed on us. He said simply that if you have goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others, this is what you've got to do. It's just in the nature of things—which means that this is a matter not just of right view but also of right resolve. You want to act on the resolve to be harmless, you want to act on the resolve that all beings be happy. Because if we could all find happiness within, then the question of who gets what outside would become a lot less urgent. People would treat one another a lot better. So these are the duties that are imposed by right resolve. If you really feel goodwill for yourself, these are the duties you follow.

All the levels of right view have their duties. With the first level of right view—about skillful action and unskillful action, the teachings on karma—the duty is to abandon anything unskillful in your actions and to develop whatever's skillful. That, the Buddha said, is a categorical teaching. In other words, it's true across the board for everybody. And again, the *ought* and the *should* here are conditional—conditioned on whether you really want to put an end to suffering.

When you get to the four noble truths, the duties expand. Now we have cause and effect, skillful cause and unskillful cause and their effects. The unskillful cause is craving. The effect or the result of the unskillful cause is suffering. The path is the condition. It doesn't *cause* the end of suffering but it takes you there. That's why the Buddha called it a path. That's the skillful action. And the skillful result is that you put an end to all your suffering.

Here the duties begin to get more particular. You get into right effort and the duty to abandon becomes the duty to abandon anything unskillful that's already arisen and to prevent anything unskillful from arising in the future. The duty to develop expands into giving rise to skillful things in the mind, giving rise to the path in the mind; and then, once it's there, you try to maintain it and bring it to the culmination of its development.

So these are the things we're doing here right now. As when you're trying to stay focused on the breath: That's developing concentration. Any thoughts coming up that would interfere with that, you let go. That's the abandoning of the craving.

When the Buddha taught the Dhamma wheel, he laid these things out. In fact, that's what the wheel is in that sutta. In the old days, when they would give lists of variables, they called it a wheel—like today, when we draw what we call a table of variables on a piece of paper. You have one set of variables on one side and another set of variables across the top. Then you work out all the permutations. We call it a table. They called it a wheel. They wouldn't have diagrams written out on paper. Instead, they'd would memorize all the permutations in a list, and they imagined the permutations going around them, like a wheel.

In the case of the four noble truths, you've got four truths with duties appropriate to each. That leads to three levels of knowledge: One is knowing the truth, the second is knowing the duty, and the third is knowing that you've completed the duty. Four times three is twelve: That's the wheel. You can think of it as a wheel with twelve spokes. We start out with wheels that have only a few spokes. As you're working on the duties, you're adding spokes to the wheel. As for whether you'll get all twelve spokes in this lifetime, that's an open issue. But if you don't follow the duties, then the wheel's certainly not going to have enough spokes to take you anywhere.

You may know the story of Shackleton and his expedition to Antarctica. They had a ship that they were going to land on one side of Antarctica, and they were going to walk across the whole continent, with another ship waiting for them on the other side. But when the original ship approached the continent, they couldn't even get anywhere near the land. They got stuck in ice, and the ice was going to crush the ship. So they had to leave the ship, get into little dinghies, and then drag the dinghies across the ice, until they finally got to open water and then tried to row those across the ocean. It sounds impossible, but they did it, and nobody died.

The secret was that Shackleton kept reminding all the men, "We don't know whether we're going to get out, but we do know that if we do our duties, that increases the chances of getting out." It'd be a miserable thing to think about if you got lazy, you gave up, and then you died; and as you were dying, you realized that the reason you were dying was because you gave up. If you hadn't given up, you wouldn't have died.

So whatever duties the men had to do, they kept doing, doing, doing. They didn't let the impossibility of the project get them down. And they accomplished some amazing things. Sailing all across a huge ocean. Landing on South Georgia and walking across the island. There were five passes through the mountains that they saw from where they were standing, so they tried four of them, one by one, and none of the four worked. It turned out that the fifth one worked and took them to safety. So they never let the situation get them down.

In the same way, it's important that you keep your spirits up as you practice. Realize that if you're going to make your way to release, it has to be through doing your duties. So don't see

these duties as onerous, as a weight bearing you down. They're an opening, an opening to freedom: freedom from suffering, freedom from all the things with which you've been weighing your mind down for who-knows-how-long.

So as you sit here, and things start seeming a little aimless, ask yourself, "Well, what is the aim here? What is my purpose in being here? There's something I've got to develop. Or there may be something I've got to abandon." As the path begins to develop, you can get to work on that duty of comprehending stress, in other words, seeing it for what it is.

The Buddha said it's five clinging-aggregates. That doesn't sound like anything familiar. But he said that these are activities of the mind, things we're doing all the time. We cling to them, we feed on them, and that's why we suffer. You want to learn how to comprehend that. If there's physical pain, you want to see that the physical pain is one thing, the suffering of the mind is something else. You've got to learn how to take them apart.

Now, to do that requires good strong powers of concentration, good strong mindfulness. This is what we're developing as we work with the breath.

So all of this has a purpose. It's going someplace. And by following those duties, it'll take you to where you want to go.