

Appropriate Attention

September 1, 2019

When we come into nature like this, we have the opportunity to put aside all our affairs of the house, all our affairs at work. Just focus on the affairs of the mind in the present moment. Just be aware in the present moment. Use the breath as your anchor to keep you here. As you work with the breath—trying out long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light—you provide yourself with a way of staying interested in the present moment. You're not just forcing the mind to be here. You realize that you're here to learn about it, and there's a lot to learn.

And the way to learn is to develop a quality that the Buddha called appropriate attention, *yoniso manasikara*, which is basically a matter of asking the right questions. Questions about what? Questions about why there's suffering and stress in the mind. In particular, asking where in the mind the suffering and the stress is coming from. If you assume that it's coming from outside, that's inappropriate attention. You're asking the wrong questions. You blame your stress and suffering on your work, on your family, on the weather, on the government, on the economy. That's looking in the wrong places. Because in the Buddha's analysis, we're not simply on the receiving end of stress, of the causes of stress that come from outside.

The stress itself is something we do and it's something we cause. The doing is in the clinging. When the Buddha talks about stress, he gives lots of examples of things that would be stressful and painful to the mind: aging, illness, and death; being separated from things we love, having to stay with things we don't like. But then, he says, the real essence of the suffering is clinging to the five aggregates. Where are they? The aggregates are inside the mind, inside your body right here, right now. And the clinging is happening inside, too. So even though we can be pained by those other things, the real suffering is in the clinging.

Now, the Buddha talks about suffering not simply because he wants us to stay with the suffering or accept it. After all, he says he teaches suffering and the end of suffering. There is a way out. He's like a doctor. When you go to see the doctor, the doctor asks you, "Where does it hurt?" And the doctor asks that not because he's a pessimist, but because he potentially has a cure. But to get the right cure, you first have to analyze the problem and figure out what the cause is. When you find the cause, get rid of the cause, then the disease goes away. It's the same with suffering. We want suffering to go away, but we try to push it away, run away from it. But that doesn't work. We have to figure out what the cause is.

Otherwise it's like having your boat filled with water. As you bail the water out of the boat, bail it out, bail it out, bail it out, it keeps coming in because you're not solving the problem at the cause. What you have to do is look for the hole through which the water is leaking. When you can seal that up, then you can finish bailing out the water and there's no problem. Nothing else is coming in. In the same way, you have to look in your mind to see what it is that comes together with the suffering. What comes together with the clinging?

The answer is the craving. First, craving for sensuality, which is our fascination with thinking about plans for sensual pleasures. The sensual pleasures themselves are not the problem. The problem is that you have this fascination with them. As you get fascinated with them, you get hungry for them. And they never provide enough, they never really give you satisfaction, so you keep looking for more. Another type of craving is the craving for becoming, where you try to take on an identity in a particular world of experience based on a desire. And there's craving for non-becoming, where you don't like your identity, you want to change it, destroy what you've got, but in the course of destroying it you take on a new identity. All these forms of craving are causes of suffering, but as the Buddha said, we go everywhere with them. They're our companions. We think they're our friends.

Ajaan Suwat used to make the comment that we have everything backwards. We think that craving is our friend and that suffering is our enemy. But if craving is our friend, it's the kind of friend who gets you to do something wrong and then runs away. You get caught by the police, and you're the one who suffers. The craving doesn't suffer. As for the suffering and the stress, they don't necessarily have friendly intentions toward you, but if you get to know them well, if you get familiar with them, you begin to see how the mind creates them, and that knowledge will set you free. So don't be afraid of these things. Come to them with appropriate attention and you'll begin to learn from them.

Appropriate attention is basically applying right view, and right view is the beginning of the path. Use the path to see that the cravings are not worth the effort that goes into them. In the beginning, the Buddha has you focus your craving on the path itself, so that you get less and less interested in things that are outside of the path, things that cause unnecessary suffering. Meanwhile, you put up with whatever necessary suffering the path requires. These are all things you can see right here in the present moment because they're happening right here all the time, simply that they're hidden from our awareness because our awareness is not still.

It's like being in a crowd of people. There's a terrorist in the crowd, but you

can't observe the actions of the terrorist because there are so many other people in there as well. This person's talking, that person is going here, going there, They're all talking at the same time, moving around all the time. So you can't see the terrorist at all. What you've got to do is get the mind to settle down, take all the different people in the mind out, one by one by one, until you find the terrorist. That's when you realize that you're not simply on the receiving end of suffering, you're also creating it. And you don't have to. You can stop doing the causes, you can let the causes go. When you're not creating suffering, nobody else can create suffering for you.

This is why we try to get the mind into the present moment. This is why we come to a quiet place like this, so that we cut down on the number of people in our mind. We cut down the number of people first by giving the mind something good to play with in the present moment (the breath), so you can get interested in what's going on here in the body, and then you begin to see what's going on in the breath. And that's when you apply appropriate attention, asking the right questions. "Where is the stress here? What's causing it? What can I do to put an end to the cause?"

You're taking on new friends, questions of appropriate attention, so that you can look at your old friendships and realize that you were palling around with people who didn't have your best interests in mind. The ones who do have your best interests in mind are those who want you to be independent, so that you can be your own person: You can depend on yourself not to create suffering for yourself. You can depend on yourself to find true happiness.